

BIBLICAL AND EXPERIENTIAL IMAGES OF THE DIVINE  
AS AIDS IN THE WORSHIP EXPERIENCE

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Elizabeth J. Nicks  
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### *Faculty Committee*

W. H. Olson

April 18, 1989  
Date

Allen J. Moore  
Dean

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## ABSTRACT

### Biblical and Experiential Images of the Divine as Aids in the Worship Experience

Elizabeth J. Nicks

As we travel through the everyday experiences of our life journey it is necessary to have signposts to give direction and to elicit meaning. Images help fulfill that task as they stand in place of and point to other realities. Especially as we attempt to progress in our spiritual journey do they assist us to perceive and relate to the Divine.

Rich and varied biblical images can, if not absolutized, contribute markedly to our attempts to make meaning of the journey by relating to the Divine in all its aspects. However, many have expressed a need for new images, arising from individual stories, and pertinent to everyday experiences. If these two image sources are not incompatible and contradictory then we should be able to use them both to better understand and to facilitate our worshipful relationship with the Divine.

In order to understand how the biblical images for the Divine arose out of individual experiences, after extensive research, this study attempts to present hypothetical reconstructions of experiences set in biblical times that may have contributed to the development of a select number

of images for the Deity.

Through surveys, experimental drawing, and class studies this investigation then looks at experiential images in two select populations, seminary students and members of a small suburban church.

An attempt is made to introduce a number of both biblical and experiential images for the Divine into the worship life of the suburban church. The resultant success and failure are analyzed in an attempt to see how the use of these two image sources can contribute to the spiritual growth and worship life of the individuals and the group as a whole.

When a rich variety of biblical images were introduced in the local church setting, a discovery and valuing of individual, experiential images followed that opened up new avenues for relating to the Deity. The moving away from a few overemphasized and absolutized images to a wider spectrum of biblical and experiential images allowed a deemphasizing of those images and a reemphasizing of that greater reality beyond.

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## Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my family - my husband, Merle Nicks, my sons, Glenn and Paul, and my mother, Mary Williams - without whose love, patience, and support it could never have been completed.



## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

The first thing to be said about imaging is that it is something one experiences, consciously or out of the personal or collective unconscious. All our lives we have been warned not to trust experience and never begin with one's own self. But the private self . . . is the only source of authentic experience and this experience can be stated and understood only by public image. . . . Deep in the experience itself is the source of the new imaging.<sup>1</sup>

As we travel through the everyday experiences of our life journey it is necessary to have signposts to give direction and to elicit meaning. Images help fulfill that task as they stand in place of and point to other realities. As noted by Claude Levi-Strauss in his classic, The Savage Mind, images play the part of the signifying while the concepts they point to are seen as the signified.<sup>2</sup> Especially as we attempt to grow and progress in our spiritual journey do they assist us to perceive and relate to the Divine.

While images can help as we seek for meaning on our journey they can also act as inhibitors and extinguishers of our visions. Within the feminist community in the past ten

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1 Nelle Morton, The Journey is Home (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 125-127.

2 Claude Levi-Strauss, The Savage Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 18.

years the preponderance of male images within the sacred corpus has been commented on in detail and with great negative feelings.

Biblical images in actuality are rich and varied and can, if not absolutized, contribute markedly to our attempts to make meaning of the journey by relating to the Divine in all its aspects.

Many leaders in feminist thought, such as Nelle Morton, have expressed a need for new images, arising from individual stories, and pertinent to the experiences and struggles of present day travelers on life's highways.

If these two image sources are not incompatible and contradictory then we should be able to use them both to better understand and to facilitate our worshipful relationship with the Divine.

The role of the symbolic in our quest for the reality of the Divine has been approached in a variety of ways and with increased interest over the past thirty years, an early example being Paul Tillich's well known work on religious symbols. The early works were often technical and analytical in nature but the emerging feminist movement resulted by the early 1970's in a number of more critical analyses of symbolic imagery within religious communities.

While this period saw many excellent works on imagery within the Judeo-Christian experience, such as Julian Hartt's Theological Method and Imagination, many felt

compelled to look outside the traditional religious experience for relevant feminine images. Merlin Stone inquired of a time When God Was a Woman while Phyllis Tribble raised questions about God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality.

The seventies also saw many women, and a few men, rejecting the Judeo-Christian experience of the Divine as unredeemably male dominated. Leaders among those who turned to Wicca and the nature religions were Z. Budapest, Mary Daly, and Skyhawk who saw more validity in these experiences.

This decade has seen the greatest volume of critical material in imagery of the Deity from both within and without the feminist movement. The World Council of Churches conducted a study of woman's role and image in the church, the results of which were published in 1983 under the title In God's Image, while Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether has inspired both reimagining and restructuring of the religious experience in her works which include Sexism and God Talk, published in 1983, and the 1986 volume, To Change the World.

The need for new images for the Divine has been addressed by a number of contemporary theologians and writers including such notables as Nelle Morton in her final work The Journey is Home, Estelle Lauter in the inspiring Women as Mythmakers, and Marcia Falk in a number of writings which address problems in the Jewish theological community.

In spite of the wealth of material this cursory look represents, an interface between biblical and experiential images of the Divine seems to be missing. Extremes seem to be the rule with evangelical fundamentalists and conservatives wanting exclusive adoption of limited biblical imagery (Father, King, Lord, etc.) for the Deity, radical feminists rejecting all male imagery (to the point of some rejecting both Judaism and Christianity in total), and more moderate feminists accepting only minimal male images while reaching for female images.

If we value all individuals as being made in the image of the Divine it would appear we need to value their images for the Divine as long as they do not dominate or degrade others. If as stated earlier images are signposts they are valuable in proportion to their effectiveness in helping us on our journey. If understood in this context all biblical and all experiential images of the Divine can be useful as we grow and progress. We need to see how the biblical images assisted people in biblical times, as well as how they assist people today to find the reality of the Divine in their lives. But also we must see how other images, arising from those same lives, can help us relate to the Divine presence. When these two sources are understood and valued they can be used to facilitate the growing worship experience, both individual and corporate, between us and the Divine.

To look at all the direct and indirect imagery used in the sacred corpus to refer to the Deity would be a task beyond the scope, in time and space allotted, of this project. The images used are limited to specific, concrete ones where direct correlation is made to the character of the divine, not ones with illusionary or inferred meanings. The images selected attempt to provide a multifaceted picture of how they work in the Bible to give a picture of the monotheistic Deity.

The personal experiences utilized were ascertained from two sources, from the experiences of a number of students at the School of Theology at Claremont, and from the faith community where this author is currently working. The latter is a small upper-middle-class United Methodist Church in suburban Southern California with a very diverse congregation ranging from conservative evangelicals to liberal feminists. It is also in this community that the result of an experimental interface of biblical and experiential images was introduced as part of the morning worship service. The response of this varied body was helpful in evaluating the validity of the thesis, that biblical and experiential imagery for the Divine can be both contributory and necessary for a fully meaningful worship experience.

## CHAPTER 2

### Biblical Images for the Divine

Mythical thought for its part is imprisoned in the events and experiences which it never tires of ordering and re-ordering in its search to find them a meaning. But it also acts as a liberator by its protest against the idea that anything can be meaningless . . . .<sup>1</sup>

The images used in the Bible to help understand the character of the Deity are rich and varied. They grew out of the everyday experiences of the people and reflect the particular culture of that far distant time. The authors of the canon took the images for the Deity that had grown out of their oral traditions and interfaced them with the events in their history where they saw God at work. Those images helped them probe and explain their God that they saw constantly entering into their everyday experiences. The elements of their stories weave the fabric that stretches from image or precept to the concept, the reality we call God.

These biblical authors seem to fit into the character defined by Claude Levi-Strauss as the "bricoleur."<sup>2</sup> This French term refers to a handyman or jack-of-all-trades who takes objects and pieces and by rearrangement,

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<sup>1</sup> Levi-Strauss, 22.

<sup>2</sup> Levi-Strauss, 20.

reconstruction, and reorientation restores to them their original function or gives them a new role or nature. Levi-Strauss takes this French concept and transforms it into a mythic bricoleur, or mythologist, who takes ideas and events of the cultic history, images that point to greater concepts and realities, and by manipulating them, by retelling their story, renews and reestablishes the link between the images, the events, and the concept they lift up. This process revalues both the image and the reality to which it points, and assists the mythologist's audience to approach that reality.

Soren Kierkegaard felt that the hardest audience to reach was Christians in a Christian nation, for he felt modern Christians had lost contact with that greater reality, had lost that depth that only comes with an ability to make the leap from image to concept, the concept that is the ultimate reality, God. While Kierkegaard was referring, for the most part, to his homeland of Denmark similar problems of reachability could be made for the United States of America with its secularized national religion and its expanding fundamentalism. Yet no Christian would say the American people are not worth the effort, nor beyond the reach if a means is found.

In an attempt to understand how the biblical images may have arisen and to provide a way for us, as twentieth-century Christians, to plug into their power this author

will attempt, in the following pages, to appropriate the role of mythic bricoleur, taking the canonical images for the Deity and the remnants of the oral tradition that surrounds them within the biblical corpus, then move back to reconstruct the narrative and the experience from which their story may have derived that resulted in the biblical images. This task is not an easy one and requires a faithfulness to the source. As Claude Levi-Strauss outlined the task:

[The] "bricoleur"...[is] constantly on the look out for "messages." Those which the "bricoleur" collects are, however, ones which have to some extent been transmitted in advance - like the commercial codes which are summaries of the past experience of the trade and so allow any new situation to be met economically, provided that it belongs to the same class as the earlier one.<sup>3</sup>

So let us take a select number of biblical images for the Deity, take into account the time and culture out of which they arose, and try to envision that process and thereby gain new appreciation and insight into their significance.

### The Rock

The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. Ps. 18: 26 4

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3 Levi-Strauss, 20.

4 All references are to the Revised Standard Version.



The arid land that stretched as far as the eye could see reflected the harsh life of the little nomadic band. Their wandering lifestyle was dictated by the availability of food and water for their herds of sheep and goats, the friendship or enmity of their sedentary neighbors, and the capricious weather which could bring scorching heat or torrential rains that would transform the gravel strewn wadis into ragging torrents. Their beasts of burden carried their entire lives including their camel's hair tents, their bedding, the men's tools and weapons, the women's weaving poles and utensils, and the children's toys.

Their leader's prayer was a simple one, a good pasture for the flocks and a secure campsite for his people, secure from both man and nature. These were his responsibility, and if they were accomplished all else would be well.

And then one day he saw it, as the herds slowly picked their way through the sparse vegetation, silhouetted against the sky, a great rock, a natural fortress, its nearly flattened top glistening with green vegetation and its steep sides streaked by water from natural wells. Here could be the answer to his dreams and prayers, if a way could be found to the top and if only the God of his people would keep their feet secure on the path until they could reach this refuge from the distresses of the world.

A way was found. A guard was set on the pathway. The children took the flocks out to pasture. The tents were

erected and camp life begun. And a time of thanksgiving was planned, thanksgiving to the God of their people who had led them to this place of refuge, and thanksgiving for the place with its safety and its bounty and its promise.

In the generations to come, as the story was told in the tents and around the campfires, the God of the people who had led them to the rock began to be compared to the character of the rock itself. Their God was a fortress and a refuge,<sup>5</sup> towering high over their enemies,<sup>6</sup> their dwelling place from the beginning of time.<sup>7</sup> And even after they left their nomadic way and became city dwellers the imagery remained with them. Weren't some of their cities built on the high points that had been the safe havens of their ancestors while others provided settings for temples to their God? And wasn't the reality of storms in an arid land and militaristic neighbors still with them? If their God would only save, protect and maintain them at this time and place even as the rock in the desert wastes had sheltered and provided for their forbearers. The image of the rock continued to help them understand something of the character of their God.

The use of rock and other nature symbols have been

5 Ps. 18:2

6 Ps. 61:2-3

7 Ps. 90:1-2

popular since biblical times in helping translate something of the divine nature. Gustaf Aulen relates this to their unchanging nature. He also feels they are safer as symbols for God than anthropomorphic ones which have a tendency to be absolutized, for "to speak of God as a rock . . . makes it quite clear it is a symbol."<sup>8</sup> However Clyde Holbrook saw a danger in impersonal images for the deity, such as rock, as he felt they "were converted to impassibility. The absolute dependable God who was to be trusted through thick and thin became an inert being without feeling or purpose."<sup>9</sup> So while the rock may be physically unchanging our perceptions of it and its meaning in our life may be quite different from our biblical forbearers.

### Wings

Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions, the Lord alone did lead him . . . .

Deut. 32:11-12a

The mother eagle perched on the edge of the stony crag that contained her nest with its inhabitants of newly hatched fledglings. Stretching far below her she could see the valley floor with its many varied, two-and four-legged

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<sup>8</sup> Gustav Aulen, The Drama and the Symbols (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 103.

<sup>9</sup> Clyde Holbrook, The Iconoclastic Deity (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1984), 196.

inhabitants. But here on the crag her children were safe from the lowland dwellers. Only winged creatures could threaten them and as long as she was there none of these would attempt anything. There was of course the danger from wind and storm but if it came she would spread her great wings over the nest and guard them with her very life. And if the wind should lift them out of the nest she would catch them on her pinions and bear them back to the safety of the crag.

Under the care and protection of their mother the young eaglettes grew. Soon came the time for them to try their own wings. But even now the mother's care and protection continued. As the young birds took their first, hesitant flights from the crag the mother eagle stretched out her wings and soared above them, appraising their progress and guarding against any that would threaten them at this vulnerable time.

To the humans living in the valley below the concern and devotion of this great feathered creature was spoken of with respect and admiration. They couldn't help but make comparisons between her care of the fledglings and the way their God had cared for them in an earlier time in their history.<sup>10</sup> What a beautiful thought, that in times of danger there is such a place of refuge as that provided by

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10 Deut. 32:11

the shadow of great wings.<sup>11</sup>

It is not only the majestic eagle that speaks of care and protection. Down in the dust behind the houses of the village the lowly hen lives out her life. Often the human takes her eggs for their own use but from time to time they leave them with her. With the passage of weeks they hatch and a small golden horde of chicks are turned out in the dust to scratch and peck and peep. Even as the mother eagle watched her fledglings as they ventured out of the nest so the dust brown hen watches over her little ones. When danger threatens the mother attempts to gather her chicks under her wings for protection but the chicks are younger and more foolish than the eaglettes were when they left the nest. They often panic and forget where their mother is, or think they can handle the danger themselves not realizing their limitations of size and youth. It is not surprising that an itinerate preacher from the Galilee would use the chicks refusal to seek out their mother's wings in time of trouble as an illustration of how humanity refuses to return to God.<sup>12</sup>

Wings that shelter and wings that provide an atmosphere for growth and reaching out and becoming, this is the imagery that comes to us from the sacred corpus. Virginia Ramsey Mollenkott, in her book, The Divine Feminine,

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<sup>11</sup> Ps. 56:1

<sup>12</sup> Luke 13:34

compares these two winged creatures and our need for their imagery.

The magnificent eagle images are associated with light, with the sun, with height, and mobility and exteriority, while the lowly hen images are associated with the shadows and darkness of the henhouse, and with depth and stillness and interiority beneath the mothering wings...we need both.<sup>13</sup>

But for many the two images that arise are the wings of our national bird and fried wings from Colonel Sanders.

#### Water

Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

Jer. 2: 12-13

The traveler was journeying north from Egypt to the great cities of Mesopotamia, following the frequently used caravan route. His solitary camel lifted miniature clouds of dust with its great feet. The man felt he knew the way that he must go but the desert is often treacherous with shifting sands giving false trails. With the monotony of the trip it was some time before he realized he had lost the trail. He attempted to correct his direction but time

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13 Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, The Divine Feminine (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 92-93.

passed and there was no sign of the caravan route. Darkness forced a stop to rest but sun rise found him once more trying to retrace his way. The blazing noon sun found his water bag empty and no sign of human habitation in sight. He realized the camel could outlast him if no water was found.

By mid-afternoon his heart leaped with joy for on the horizon he detected some kind of human fabrication. But as he drew nearer his heart again fell for all that was before him were the ruins of an ancient water way, its clay cisterns dry and broken from disuse. He rode on into the growing dusk, doubting his future, and finally collapsing with fatigue when the darkness of the night made progress impossible.

The first light of dawn roused the traveler from his deathlike sleep. He raised his head and looked around for his only companion of the past two days, his camel. There, not a stone's throw away, it stood calmly drinking from the crystal waters of a desert spring, a source of life and hope for the despairing traveler.

It is not surprising that a people living in and around an arid land would compare the word of God that comes to a thirsting soul to the life giving water of the desert fountains<sup>14</sup> or the desert wells.<sup>15</sup> The importance too of

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14 Jer. 2:13

15 Isa. 12:3

other natural sources of water, rivers and rain storms, are also valuable images to such a people when they try to explain the life giving power of their God.<sup>16</sup>

To have been thirsty is to have valued a drink of water or to have come in dusty and dirty from physical labor is to have valued the cleansing and refreshing power of this marvelous liquid. Perhaps its imagery is more lasting than the rock or the wings though not in the extreme experienced by those dwelling in the arid lands of biblical days. For the modern city dweller it is seldom the difference between life and death. While Gustav Aulen sees that in the Bible "God's fountain is the same as the fountain of life and the fountain of salvation,"<sup>17</sup> for most of us today a water fountain has a whole other image and meaning.

### Light

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

1 John 1:5

Marium lived in the home of her eldest son and his wife. She had had a good and fruitful life. She had born her husband, of blessed memory, seven children, four boys and three girls. All had married and prospered and now

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<sup>16</sup> Ps. 65:9-10

<sup>17</sup> Aulen, 101.



she had sixteen grandchildren. She had many blessings.

But now things were changing. Her beloved Joseph, of blessed memory, had been gone five years. And now she was losing something else. A cloud had descended over her eyes. If she stood in the bright sun one could see the cloud reflected in the depths of her gentle brown eyes. At first it only fuzzed the edges of things she wished to see. But lately things were getting worse. She would enter the house from the sunlit grape arbor and it was as though night had descended, she could see neither person nor object for many minutes. The night was even worse for even with the help of the little oil lamp she would stumble over the largest of objects. A darkness of helplessness and despair had descended on her life.

Abner was returning late from a busy day in the village market. It had been very profitable for he had sold all of his day's harvest. But his last customer had been extra talkative delaying his departure for home. In spite of the hour the path would have usually been lit by the glow of a thousand stars, but tonight storm clouds were gathering making the night seem threatening in its darkness. Threatening also from the dark could be robbers waiting to take his days proceeds. Again and again Abner stumbled on rocks or lost his footing and fell into the little gully that paralleled the road. Pain, fear, and fatigue were taking their toll when off in the distance he thought he saw

a light. His heart leaped with joy within him. With renewed energy he moved toward the glow soon realizing it also was moving toward him. As the light drew closer a voice Abner recognized called out, "Father!" His daughter, Ruth, had come out with torch to guide his steps home.

When light becomes a symbol of security and knowledge, and darkness danger and the unknown, as experience seems to portray, it seems a logical next step to compare the Deity to a light that dispels our fears and shows us the way of salvation, even as light dispels darkness and illumines the pathway.<sup>18</sup> Another attribute of light is its ability to show things as they are, even as its illumination allowed Ruth to recognize her father. If a person is upright being recognized would be a pleasant experience<sup>19</sup> and the light of recognition welcomed. If, however, one followed an evil and devious lifestyle darkness might be preferred<sup>20</sup> and a God who is symbolized by the light avoided.

As long as cataracts veil the light from peoples eyes and violent figures lurk in darkened alleyways the blessing that the light bestows will be valued. Light is always most valued in contrast with dark as noted by Aulen. "When light is used as a symbol for God, it is used as a contrast symbol. God's light contrasts with darkness and night which

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<sup>18</sup> John 8:12

<sup>19</sup> Ps. 97:11

<sup>20</sup> John 3:19

are forced to withdraw when God's light shines."<sup>21</sup> And so as we contrast our saved state with our lostness it seems natural to use light as a continuing symbol for God's salvation. Perhaps the only problem here is realizing we are lost and experiencing the dark night of the soul, that night when our fears of earthquake, nuclear destruction, and AIDS overcome us with dark despair. We must come to the realization that we need the light.

### Shepherd

For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

Ezek. 34:11-12

He sat quietly on the rocky promontory overlooking the lush little meadow where his small band of sheep were grazing. The thoughts racing through his young head belied the quietness of the scene. At thirteen he was a man, having passed through his people's rite of maturity. And now he was able to go to the family sheepfold and take out his own small flock, no longer having to rely on his father or his uncles for permission or supervision. It was quite a

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<sup>21</sup> Aulen, 101.

responsibility. Sheep were gentle creatures but not very smart. He would have to provide firm strong leadership, taking them to places of good pasture and fresh water, keeping them together, and constantly being on guard for any threat, be it human or animal. But he felt he was well prepared for the task, after all his father and his father's father before him had been shepherds. And he had learned the way of sheep from the time he could walk. When he was small his father even brought young lambs into the home to share their board and bed. He was ready, or at least he hoped he was.

The day was waning and it was almost time to begin the trek back to the sheepfold when he noticed a restlessness among the sheep on the far side of the meadow. The trained eyes of the young shepherd scanned the bushes beyond the flock, alert for any unusual movement. Then he saw it, slinking along below the bottom branches of the bushes, a wolf. Slowly but purposefully the young man moved, so as not to alert the wolf to his presence, pulling the leather sling from his waist band and scooping a stone from the ground. In a blur of motion the sling was loaded and the stone let fly. The wolf let out a yelp of pain and bolted into the bushes while the sheep scattered in the other direction which thankfully was toward the youngster. With a calm voice and gentle motions he gathered them in and, as though nothing had happened, started them on the path home.

Again the thoughts raced through his head. Trouble had come but he had been ready. All his sheep were safe and on their way home. But at the same time he understood the fear and panic the sheep had felt. He had been unsure and afraid at times, and probably would be again. Hopefully there would be someone to look out for him in those times just as he had looked out for his sheep.<sup>22</sup>

The shepherd image in the First Testament ties together the caring nature of the shepherd with the helpless dependent nature of the sheep. Out of this relationship comes a feeling of peace that continues to be invoked to this day as in a verse from this modern Israeli song by Naomi Shemer:

The shofar is sounding from the temple  
To call the world to prayer.  
A shepherd pauses in the valley  
And peace is everywhere.<sup>23</sup>

By the time of the Second Testament the role of the shepherd had taken on a new aspect. As noted by Aulen it had become "a name of high honor akin to Lord and King...."<sup>24</sup> Yet in the life and death of the sheep the role of the shepherd was always one of strength and power, an image we seem to have lost when our contact with shepherds is limited to children in bathrobes at Christmas.

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<sup>22</sup> Ezek. 34:11-16.

<sup>23</sup> Naomi Shemer, "Yerushaliem Shel Zahav." Mark Rosen: Concert Live (Ontario, CA: Temple Shalom, 1988), Cassette.

<sup>24</sup> Aulen, 104-105.

Father

I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chastise him with a rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; but I will not take my steadfast love from him, . . . .  
2 Sam. 7:14-15a

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

2 Cor. 1:3-4

From his couch on the rooftop the man could detect the muffling of the city sounds as the day came to a close. There was still enough light for him to see, if he gazed off to his left, the edge of the city wall and, above on the right, the near corner of the outer temple. He was a man who, because of his position in the society, should have felt a great sense of accomplishment. Instead it was as though the weight of the western wall were on his shoulders, for he was a father of two sons. Most people would say this was a blessing for which he should be grateful, but all too often it seemed more a curse than a blessing.

The two boys were as different as day and night. Daniel, the elder, was studious, even tempered and obedient. Simon, four years younger, seemed unable to keep his mind on one thing for more than a few moments at a time, was given to extreme mood swings, and was never there when his father

needed him. How could he be a good father to two who were so dissimilar?

It was so different when they were little. When he returned home at eventide they would both rush to him, vying for attention and a chance to share what they had been doing through the day, Daniel pulling at his robes and Simon vaulting into his arms. But now they had changed; they had interests that they did not care to share, interests that were not always compatible with his interests and values.

Within his society his role as head of the family was well defined. His was a position of unquestioned authority demanding obedience and honor. The consequences to his sons of verbally or physically countering his will would be dire. But also he had responsibilities to them. While living under his roof they must look to him for both physical and spiritual care. He was the one to teach them the ceremonies and obligations of their faith and their culture, which in this case were the same. Yet how could he carry out his responsibility when a child wouldn't listen?

The father knew he would always love both his sons but realized that often love must be strong in setting limits, disciplining and correcting, and even pronouncing judgments. He prayed he would not act out of malice or in a destructive manner but temper his justice with mercy and always be ready to forgive. Perhaps some day Simon would realize that in saying no his father was reaffirming his love for this,

his wayward one.

In the hierarchical society of biblical times the role of father was often a stern and even cruel one, as seen from a modern perspective.<sup>25</sup> However the role of father associated with the deity was not always, or even often, identical with that role in the society. God as father incorporated select aspects of that parenting role while rejecting others. The parental aspect most frequently lifted up as distinguishing God as father from earthly role models is his loving kindness (Hb: *hesed*) that manifests itself, at different times, as either grace or tough love. A change that seems to appear in the transition from the First Testament to the second, according to Gustav Aulen, is the change from Father in the authoritarian sense, as father of the ruler and of the nation, to a more personal parent in Abba or daddy. "God as Father is the God who saves, the God of love and grace...the universal Father...the Father of the new people of God....God is our Father."<sup>26</sup> For a person coming from a home where this caring, saving, concerned type of parenting is modeled by the male parent, accepting the image of God as father is both appropriate and satisfying. However if one's earthly father is restrictive, abusive, and domineering to cast God in this mode is to risk rejection of God. One may even see

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25 Exod. 21:7, 15:17; Deut. 13:6-10.

26 Aulen, 105



a manifestation of tough love by the deity as threatening. Here we see an illustration of that anthropomorphism that Aulen feared would "ruin the image of God [it was] meant to convey,"<sup>27</sup> and Sallie McFague felt would make "the model of father become idolatrous."<sup>28</sup>

### Mother

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me . . . . Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, and I took them up in my arms; but they did not know I healed them. I led them . . . with bands of love, . . . and I bent down to them and fed them.

Hos. 11:1-4

For Debra to be a wife and mother in a household of this size meant her responsibilities were many.<sup>29</sup> The home she shared with her husband and their three children was of stone and mud and constructed around an open courtyard that served as her kitchen. Here she came before the first light of dawn to begin the food preparation for the day. As the day progressed and her husband left for work in the fields her varied and busy schedule became apparent. There must be

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<sup>27</sup> Aulen, 106.

<sup>28</sup> Sallie McFague, Models of God (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 97.

<sup>29</sup> Prov. 31:10-31

time for the care and instruction of the children, time for weaving and making of clothing, bedding and other household items, and time for the planting and processing of those crops that played a part in the food supply for the family.

Her husband constantly was amazed at what she could accomplish. And the children always knew she would be there for them. When little Ruben fell down the stairs from the roof she was there to pick him up and sooth his hurts. When Elisabeth pricked her finger trying to learn to sew her mother was there to bind the wound and to encourage her to start up again. All this while still nursing little Asa who was just learning to walk and was into everything. She was truly a blessing to the family.

Super-Mom is not such a new or modern concept, it seems, for in the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs she is also expected to be a sharp business woman, buying and managing property,<sup>30</sup> and to care for the poor and indigent in her community.<sup>31</sup> That such a superior being might be used as a signpost to some aspect of the divine nature might be understandable to us today, but how would it be received in the hierarchical male-dominated society of bible times?

The most commonly accepted role of the mother within the society of the First Testament was to bear the children,

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<sup>30</sup> Prov. 31:16.

<sup>31</sup> Prov. 31:20.

to nurse and feed them, to heal their wounds, and to call them in at the end of the day. If this is true, and it would seem to fit the culture, then the job description for God at the beginning of the eleventh chapter of Hosea (see above) is the image of God as Mother, rather than God as Father. Also both testaments have numerous birthing references associated with God such as "You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you, and you forgot the God who gave you birth."<sup>32</sup> As only the female of the species gives birth this would seem to be a use of Mother God imagery.

If we are open to seeing the Mother God imagery in the bible it can be a help in getting another handle on the character of the deity. But here as with other images there is the danger of absolutizing it. In a conversation with this author and four other women four years ago, Nelle Morton expressed concern that the feminine expression of the Godhead would come to be as much of an idol as the male expression had come to be. Or as Ann Belford Ulanov of Union Theological Seminary put it, to "say, 'God is mother and unless you agree then you are against God and women too,' is only to collapse the symbol, to take something that might be a passageway and make it a closed door."<sup>33</sup> If we are to use the symbols of father and mother as signposts to

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<sup>32</sup> Deut. 32:18.

<sup>33</sup> Ann Belford Ulanov, Picturing God (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 1986), 170.

the divine, we must affirm with Sallie McFague that "God is she and he and neither,"<sup>34</sup> and then move on.

### Conclusion

In the north of England, high on a primeval rock, visible from miles around, stands the ancient city of Lincoln. And at the center of the old city, and of the rock, towers one of the earliest of the medieval cathedrals. High in the stony arms of its massive transepts are two great round windows, the Bishop's eye and the Dean's eye, so named for they overlook the residences of these two illustrious gentlemen. The windows are made up of a multitude of small images portraying various religious stories and happenings. These minute scenes can only be seen in detail through a telescope erected on the floor of the cathedral. The scenes are beautiful and meaningful pictures in themselves but when each great window is viewed as a whole its magnificence and impact on the viewer exceed the sum total of the impact of its parts.

The various biblical images for the deity seem to function as the individual scenes in those great windows. They each tell a story of how God has related and still relates to individuals and humanity as a whole, but they are each only a part of the greater whole. No single story, or image, can give a picture of that greater reality which we

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<sup>34</sup> McFague, 98.

call God. And as we lift one image above others we give a distorted picture of that reality. On our faith journeys it is true that one image or another may speak to us more strongly than others, but that does not make it better than them. And that is not a reason for us to try and force our momentarily most-meaningful image on others. If we value our sisters and brothers we must not devalue those biblical images for the Divine that speak to them.

This importance of seeing the pieces as a part of the whole would seem to parallel John Wesley's insistence on "setting the [biblical] texts in the context of the whole of Scripture,"<sup>35</sup> or as in our illustration, the individual scenes in the unity of the great window. Yet we need to see and probe all those texts, all those images, that our picture of the whole, of that reality we call God, may be more complete and more visible to our inner eye.

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<sup>35</sup> Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), 26.

## CHAPTER 3

## Experiential Images of the Divine

Experience is the medium through which the sources [of theology] "speak" to us, through which we can receive them.<sup>1</sup>

The images that function in our everyday relations with the deity are usually a blending of biblical and experiential sources, the particular blend determined by the character and background of the individual. As we look at these two sources we must consider the idea that the experiential images have as much to say as do those that are scripturally based. John Wesley lifted up the idea that experience could act as a confirmation of the biblical even referring to that experience at times "as the 'internal' evidence for Christianity."<sup>2</sup> Calling a personal or corporate experience of God "revelation," Paul Tillich stated that "as 'Word of God' is not restricted to the holy scripture, so 'revelation' is not restricted to the revelatory experiences on which all actual religions are based."<sup>3</sup> That these revelatory images can take unusual form is illustrated in the sacred corpus as well as in our

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1 Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1:40.

2 Robert E. Chiles, Theological Transition in American Methodism (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983), 85.

3 Tillich, 3:256.

experiences, for didn't Amos see God as a construction engineer with plumb line in hand?<sup>4</sup> Allowing for a validity, therefore, in the experiential and in an attempt to identify these experiential images and ascertain how they work, the author probed the issue with three groups, a randomly selected group of students from the School of Theology at Claremont, a group of feminists, and members of a small suburban church, with interesting results.

#### Seminary Students

The School of Theology at Claremont is a liberal seminary supported by the United Methodist Church. At the time of the survey the student population was divided 53% male and 47% female and represented a diverse mix racially, nationally, and culturally. A questionnaire entitled "Imaging The Divine" (see appendix) was distributed to thirty-five randomly selected students and sixteen were returned in some degree of completion. The results were an interesting blend of the predictable and the surprising, considering the group and the institution.

In an attempt to see what images were functioning for these individuals the first inquiry on the questionnaire asked them about specific images that came to mind when the deity was mentioned. The one that emerged the most frequently was light, occasionally listed with no

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<sup>4</sup> Amos 7:7.

explanation, but usually with modifiers. There was color to the light, yellow and white, and shape, as a halo. The source could be important with one individual shifting from sunlight to moonlight while another lifted up its nature, being like electricity or a fireball. A response not directly related to light was one that lifted up the color red. The only other nature image raised at this point in the questionnaire was the sea, though characteristics such as loving, omnipotent, and wise were mentioned.

A number of anthropomorphic images emerged in response to the first question. One person admitted, with regret, that the old man with the beard came to mind. This image usually appeared later in the survey under rejected images. Two respondents lifted up female images that took relational stances. One was a figure that reached out protectively and even touched the individual in a comforting and reassuring manner. The other was the figure of a mother carrying her baby. The final anthropomorphic image was that of Jesus but not in the usual stereotypical mode as the description and setting for the encounter were not biblical. This person saw Jesus as a young man of about 25 dressed for a hiking trip. He was encountered beside a high mountain lake where time was found for conversation that reflected love, concern, and humor on the part of Jesus.

The question that had the most consistency in response was in regard to rejected images. Ten of the sixteen



respondents expressed moderate to strong rejection of some form of male imagery for the divine. For several it was the old man, as in the Sistine Chapel, with or without the beard, that they saw in some threatening or dominating stance. A couple rejected any anthropomorphic image and one in particular objected to the northern European portrayal of Jesus when historically he was semitic.

In an attempt to probe the positive functioning images of the respondents the next question inquired about aspects of the divine that the individual espoused or identified with. This produced the most diverse response of the four questions on the form.

A number of concrete images came out of this inquiry while the characteristics of these manifestations were similar with a lot of overlap. In an attempt to avoid gender specificity several persons approached an androgynous image for the divine with such words as "God/Goddess," "God/ess," and "The Divine She and He." A couple had definite female images such as the crone, the Earth Mother, and "my grandmother." Important in these, as well as in the "spirit" imagery lifted up by a few others, was the loving, caring, concerned aspect that was manifest in an intimate and intentional way. Even the person who lifted up the nature image of water related to the nurturing effects of rain. A knowing that is manifest as wisdom and a creating that is powerful, ongoing and reconstructive were also

repeating themes. The Deity, however perceived, was an important part of these persons' ongoing life journey.

The final question looked at rejected aspects and here there was much overlap and a good degree of consistency. Only two of the group referred to the male image of "God the Father" because of its perceived oppressive nature. A number lifted up their aversion to any image that is "all," such as "all powerful" or "all knowing." A number of negatively perceived characteristics were rejected, among them punishing, forceful, angry, dominating, and judgmental.

Looking back over the responses it would seem that the biblical image of light is alive and well in this particular seminary setting. The students lifted up wisdom imagery in referring to the wise old crone of celtic mythology and the knowing and affirming grandmother. This would seem analogous to the quality of light to illumine and show things as they are. Another aspect of light is its ability to warm and what is seen as more warming than love, an aspect of the Divine repeatedly referred to. Anthropomorphic imagery seem to be rejected outright by most of the respondents while a few resorted to very specific human representations of the Deity, as Jesus or a woman in a very specific form. An almost unanimous need for an intimate, relational image was expressed, while the specific manifestation was very individualized.

### Feminists

According to Ann Belford Ulanov we all contain within our most secret soul our own personal image of God, an image that too often we fear and/or deny. But we must not let this go on. According to Professor Ulanov, "If we are ever to reach through our God-images to the God who breaks all our images, then we must begin with our own pictures for God - noticing them, embracing them, housing them."<sup>5</sup>

In an attempt to probe these inner images an experiment was conducted with a class in feminist theology at the School of Theology in Claremont. All members of the class were self-admitted feminists of one form or another, but had, through a semester of shared hopes and dreams and experiences, become a close, trusting sisterhood. At the last meeting of the class, held in the evening, the group of nine women sat in a rough circle and began by quietly listening to soft celtic music. The lights were turned off and in the center of the group burned a single candle, an aid in helping the individuals center themselves. When the music ended they were asked to look at the candle and think how it, from its central location in the room, was able to light the entire class. Then they were urged to close their eyes, to look within themselves, and to try to find that image of the divine that illumined their existence. They had been provided with blank sheets of paper and colored

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<sup>5</sup> Ulanov, 165.

pencils and for the next few minutes were busy trying to recapture on paper their inner vision. This was followed immediately by a time in which they could share their images and the meaning they attached to them.

According to Joseph Zinker in his book, Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy, anyone engaged in creative process is an artist, and through drawing or painting the artist can come "to know himself [or herself] within a relatively short time,"<sup>6</sup> and hopefully also make contact with those images of the Divine within. Zinker saw this creative process as "a metamorphosis from fragmentation to integration, from contradiction to unity, from tentativeness to rootedness, from a surface quality to richness, from lack of awareness to substance, from flightiness to presence."<sup>7</sup>

The first image shared appeared like a dark brown, rounded mountain top. The person who drew it said that when she looked within she saw a great dark shape that in spite of its color and form was not frightening. There was about it a sense of great power, but power at rest, waiting to move forward. She seemed to find this a very useful and encouraging image for there was an awareness of a certain accessibility to the image and its power, a relational quality about it she could participate in.

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Zinker, Creative Process in Gestalt Therapy (New York: Vintage, 1978), 236-237.

<sup>7</sup> Zinker, 239-240.

The second person did not seem to image in color but instead perceived an opening flower, but more than a flower, that was without tint or hue. It seemed a growing creating force, more than an object, that was a part of her but more than just herself, a reality that was both internal and external.

Within the third woman there seemed to be another woman, portrayed in pale orange with arms and legs open but without facial features, hands, or feet. In her explanation she said that while the figure within did not have visible features, the lack of hands and feet were due to her limited artistic talents. She perceived the open arms as a symbol of inclusive love while the legs were in position to give birth as creation was ongoing. Again the relational character of the image was lifted up as the most important.

The fourth response was the most colorful for it seemed this artist had internalized the flame of the candle that had begun the experiment. Most of the paper was a representation of a giant candle flame in yellow and red, orange and brown. Flying close to the flame was a butterfly upon whose white wings were repeated the brighter colors of the flame, while its body was a mixture of black and brown. For this person the image of the deity within was light while the butterfly stood for her own spirit that wanted to come as close as she could to this divine essence and the closer she came the more she reflected the divine character,

even as the butterfly in the picture reflected the colors of the flame. But her spirit is not static any more than the butterfly is static. Her spirit must take on the colors of the flame, the essence of the Divine, and carry it out to those that don't know its beauty. Again a relational theme but this time not only with the Deity but with others.

The next was the most confusing of the renderings and the explanation didn't clear everything up. The picture was a di-chromatic conception rendered in only brown and orange. The orange was only a small upper corner on the right and left of the picture. Within were two rough figures, a number of squiggly lines, and a curved bar across the bottom. The woman said she saw a number of images within, none very clear, moving in a cloud. After a while two seem to appear, a figure with arms outreaching in a loving manner and a woman's torso. The space where the images were was dark but there was a glow, not a definite light, around the area. She felt, somewhat hesitantly, that the torso echoed her own feminine nature while the figure was in response to her need of love and acceptance just as she was. Again the connectional aspect.

Another monochromatic rendering appeared as the sixth drawing. There was a large, dark, shapeless mass in the center that had small circular holes randomly placed on it. Around the primary mass were a number of smaller irregular masses a few of which were shaped like the missing pieces in

the larger mass. The person who had this image seemed to have a concrete idea of its meaning. The deity was the larger mass while we are the smaller ones. As our nature comes to mirror that of the Deity our shape approximates the missing parts in the large mass. At some time in the future our essence will merge with that of the Deity, which was our original source as well as our destination.

In the seventh picture the candle again appeared but only to light the way to the image within, an image of a woman with long hair and outstretched arms. This is similar to an image of the Deity described in the previous survey though the person describing it is not the same. Again the descriptive aspects of accepting, loving, caring, and being non-judgmental are associated with the image by the person who drew it. The only colors present in this view were in the woman's hair, which was yellow, and in the candle which was yellow with a flame that blended yellow, orange, black and green. The woman herself had no color other than her hair and no features.

The next to the last picture again was rampant with color, predominantly red, that flowed up and out. It was described as a source of energy, not self contained, but reaching out to engulf all it came in contact with. There was no fear associated with it, only a feeling of warmth and power, accessible to all who come in contact with it.

Finally another monochromatic rendering that needed

explanation before it could be understood. This class member said that when she looked within she saw her own uterus, but then she realized she was looking at something more. It was that cosmic womb from which all of creation came and continues to come, a symbol of an unending process, and a realization that her own internal structure was made in the image of the Divine, thereby affirming herself.

While we are not Gestalt therapists, perhaps we can find some guidelines from Joseph Zinker to help us interpret these artistic creations. According to Zinker if the image produced is visually disjointed and scattered so is the person who produced it, while if the impression is whole and complete the artist tends to feel a fullness and integration of self.<sup>8</sup> If we couple this with the observation by Ann Ulanov that our inner "pictures [of the Deity] are points of entry into our relationship with God,"<sup>9</sup> then a visually disjointed picture would seem to point toward a discontinuous and broken relationship with the Deity while a whole or complete image would indicate a full or healthy association.

Nine women with nine separate and distinct images. Yet a common thread can be found, a thread that ties the individual to their image of the divine, and through that image to the divine reality it points to. We need to know

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<sup>8</sup> Zinker, 251.

<sup>9</sup> Ulanov, 181.



we are accepted and valued by our God, to realize we are a part of an ongoing creative and nurturing reality and process. Some seem more sure of this than others but for all it seems the goal, the light of hope at the end of the tunnel. This seems to be what these women's images from within tell us.

#### A Suburban Church

The church utilized in this study is located approximately 35 miles east of downtown Los Angeles at the edge of the foothills. Its membership of 208 persons is mainly upper middle class and while containing persons of fairly liberal opinions it is predominantly conservative both politically and religiously. This author engaged two distinct groups in discussions about their images for God over a period of several weeks. The first was an adult Sunday school class of 15 individuals, male and female, ranging in age from twenty-six to seventy-five. The second group was the Youth Fellowship which was for both Senior and Junior High students.

The general approach for both groups was basically the same. For the first few meetings each group looked at biblical images for the Deity which included nature images such as rock and water, anthropomorphic images such as King, Judge, shepherd, and father, and characteristics such as love and wisdom. The next couple of sessions the members of

each group were encouraged to look to themselves and their own life experiences for images that speak of and point to the divine reality.

Among the adult group inclusive language for God was suspect and female pronouns for the Deity were tantamount to sacrilege. The one exception to the latter was a family in the class from the Philippines where there is only one third person pronoun, not separate he and she. The group was very willing to look at images for God in the Bible and even admitted there were female and birth imagery used there though they weren't comfortable with the title Mother God as it wasn't biblical except by inference. The journey into experiential imagery was a very frustrating one for this author for while these adults would say that they saw God revealed in others, to find specific images in their own experiences that could function as sign posts and revelatory images of the Deity seemed very threatening. The problem of the tension between the authority of biblical images and the role of experiential reflections seemed to parallel the problems encountered in the World Council of Churches study reported in the book In God's Image.<sup>10</sup> For this group of suburban Christians, the denial of the validity of their own images or perhaps the total absence or estrangement of their personal reflections seemed to correlate with conclusions

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<sup>10</sup> Janet Crawford and Michael Kinnamon, eds., In God's Image (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 85.

reached by Ann Ulanov. "The images people have within themselves and the images that are available in tradition and Scripture do not touch. They do not ignite one another."<sup>11</sup> After much dancing around between biblical images and possible images from their collective experiences a few, hesitantly, raised images that were meaningful to them. One man admitted that every time he saw a beautiful sunset he thought of God as the creator who is still creating, and he gave thanks. An elderly woman admitted that whenever she looked into the face of her grandchildren she was filled with the wonder of God's ongoing plan. An older man from the Philippines, who had been a farmer in the islands, saw God in the miracle of growing crops. For another God was a smile on the face of a stranger. In spite of this minimal sharing there seemed to be a feeling among many members of the group that to propose images from their own experience would be presumptuous as no one else would probably see the validity in their image. They seemed unable to accept that their image could have validity even if, and especially if, it was uniquely their own. According to too many of them only biblical images were valid. They seemed to have absolutized the biblical images at the expense of their personal images. The result of such action, according to Professor Ulanov, "is that we get a religion of words instead of experiences of the living

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<sup>11</sup> Ulanov, 167.

Word."<sup>12</sup>

Those few that were willing to share their images seemed empowered by the process. They seemed able to identify with individuals from biblical times who had named God as a result of a personal, individual, or group experience of divine reality. Also they were quick to realize that while God was not the images, God was, just as God was not the biblical rock or shepherd, but was the great I AM.<sup>13</sup>

The adventure into imaging with the youth began in similar fashion, that is looking at biblical images, but the response was different. If a biblical image did not speak to them they were quick to question and/or reject it, such as royal imagery (King, Ruler of Heaven, etc.). Others were questioned but not wholly rejected, a good example being shepherd as they had trouble seeing themselves as sheep. While light was an image they seemed to unanimously internalize they had considerable trouble explaining why. In popcorn fashion they expressed ideas like "God lights up the dark places in my life," "You can't hide things from God because God is like a flashlight on a moonless night," and "God's love is like the warmth from a lighted fire in the fireplace."

When it came to internal images they also were hesitant

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<sup>12</sup> Ulanov, 168.

<sup>13</sup> Exod. 3:14.

to look within their own experiences for images they thought were appropriate. In an attempt to give them another possible image for the divine, and there by free there own inner images, a poem by Alla Bozarth-Campbell was shared with them, the following of which is a portion:

Bakerwoman God,  
 I am your living bread.  
 Strong, brown, Bakerwoman God,  
 I am your low, soft  
     and being shaped loaf.  
 I am your rising bread, well-kneaded  
     by some divine and knotty pair of  
     knuckles, by your warm earth-hands.  
 I am bread well-kneaded.  
 Put me in your fire, Bakerwoman God,  
     put me in your own bright fire.<sup>14</sup>

After a few moments of reflective silence the ice was broken when one young woman said that God was like a psychologist. There were several expressions of derision and negativism but this girl had confidence that this image was valid for her and, as she did not care what the others thought about it, she went on to explain why. She felt a psychologist would be concerned about her as an individual and about her "making it" in the world. This professional would not have "an axe to grind" or an agenda that would be forced on her, as she thought her parents did. And finally

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<sup>14</sup> Iben Gjerding and Katherine Kinnamon, eds., No Longer Strangers: A Resource for Women and Worship (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983); reprinted as Women's Prayer Services (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publs., 1987), 54.

the "shrink" would accept her where she was without being judgmental about what had gone on before. This was her image of God. After her explanation several of the other youth admitted they could see how such an image of God could function for her, if not for them. One of the youth leaders pointed out how her image of psychologist related to the image of God as counselor in the Bible. While she wasn't sure she understood the relationship the young woman said she would like to look into it. Is it possible that her new image for the divine reality will call to life again an old image?<sup>15</sup>

Another member of the group refused to acknowledge any images for the divine as she felt it would limit God as, in spite of everything, we as humans tend to absolutize them. This particular individual comes from an abusive family situation which would help explain her rejection of parental imagery primarily and then, by progression, other imagery. Because of past experiences, of which only a small number were known to the group leaders, her symbols for the Deity had died. Perhaps this was because she had affixed too restrictive an interpretation on them, a danger lifted up by F. W. Dillistone. "Literalism, rigid one-to-one correspondence between symbol and reality, removes all the overtones and intimations and imaginative suggestions which

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<sup>15</sup> Ulanov, 183.

a true symbol always possesses."<sup>16</sup> And because of this loss her experience of the divine was limited.

Silence returns to the group, as if one person's rejection of imagery stifles their imagination. The group leader reminds them that images are signposts, signposts to God, and asks if any of them have signposts (instead of images as that word seems to inhibit them) that help them get to that divine reality. Again a moment of catharsis as one young man begins to share, his eyes filling up with tears as he speaks. For him the signpost that helps him find and understand God is his mother who cares enough to listen and answer his halting questions. He seemed hesitant as if to use someone living and known to others in the group as an aid in discovering God might be wrong. But there is a murmured acceptance and appreciation for his choice. In his book, The Power of Symbols, F. W. Dillistone affirms that "The most powerful of all symbols is a living person."<sup>17</sup> For this young man his mother was not God but for him represented that caring concern that is a trait of the Deity, and in her patient instruction showed him a greater reality. She had not become, as too many of the television evangelists did, an end in herself for her son. She was a true signpost/image.

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<sup>16</sup> F. W. Dillistone, The Power of Symbols (London: SCM Press, 1986), 217.

<sup>17</sup> Dillistone, 231.

Several of the young people lifted up the image of light again as being the most meaningful symbol, for them, of the Deity, thus repeating the feelings of the seminary students. As they described it, the light that was a meaningful image for them was the light of a candle in a darkened room. The dimly lit candle that is carried into the sunlit sanctuary on Sunday morning does not function for them anymore than a 150-watt light bulb that leaves no corners of darkness in a room. It was in contrast with the darkness and its fearful unknowns that the candle light came to represent God's presence in their lives. Their analysis of light as a symbol for the Divine parallels that in the Bible, as analyzed by Gustav Aulen who also described it as a "contrast symbol."<sup>18</sup>

A few days after the class session one of the young men brought this author a copy of a poem he had written. He did not want to discuss it at that time, just share it. It follows as it was written:

O divine rock star -  
 you get your energy from  
 beer and candy bars.<sup>19</sup>

What can be said about this young man's image of God? Paul Diel points out that our image for the divine arises from

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<sup>18</sup> Aulen, 101.

<sup>19</sup> Richard White, "Concert God," [poem] 1988.



our inner psychic functioning<sup>20</sup> while Ann Ulanov states that "the pictures we have of God...will show us unmistakably what we leave out in ourselves and what we must look at."<sup>21</sup> Young people are drawn to the rock culture and to its flamboyant stars. Does this mean that a rock star-God would have a special appeal to a youth, drawing them, yet ever distant, and at the same time invigorated by the same things that so many of our youth today rely on, booze and junk food. It is God created in their own image, yet MTV-size.

### Conclusion

Within the seminary setting, where people are encouraged to share their faith journeys, to question their preconceptions, and to stretch and grow in their faith, there is an openness to look within and without for new and meaningful images that may facilitate a worshipful relationship with the Divine. This was evidenced by the high percentage of response on the questionnaire (16 returned out of 35 distributed). The images produced by the students were many and varied, expressing unique individual approaches to the Deity. Their common thread, however, was the way they expressed a relatedness between the individual and the Deity. The repetition of terms like listening,

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Diel, The God-Symbol (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971), 194.

<sup>21</sup> Ulanov, 171.

caring, supporting, justice, and loving stressed the positive nature of this relationship, while rejection of characteristics that evidenced a cruel, judgmental, controlling, and demeaning nature for the Deity limited this part of the divine nature and the relationships it might spawn.

In spite of this openness to new and varied imagery, the categorical rejection by many students of certain images, especially particular male expressions, speaks of that "selective amnesia" that is mentioned in the World Council of Churches' study, In God's Image.<sup>22</sup> Individuals choose only those images they like while rejecting and condemning others that might have something to say to them about the greater reality of God.

Within the local church setting the invitation to share personal images was met with great skepticism and hesitancy. While the adults and youth could not agree on the universal acceptability of biblical images for the Deity, with the adults accepting them all unreservedly while the youth rejecting a number of them categorically, both groups seemed inhibited and reluctant to probe and validate their own inner visions of the Divine. A recent history of conservative ministers (prior to the present pastor) who stressed conformity in and control of the congregation rather than growth and freedom might explain their reticence

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22 Crawford and Kinnamon, 87.

in opening up. The adult group is more accepting of one another and in the past has been able to open up about personal matters. As they learn to accept and honor each other's private pictures of the Deity as gateways for the individual to relate to and worship God, they will all grow in their faith.

The youth were slow to start and probe their inner visions. But taking the position lifted up by John Wesley when he argued "that such experience is self-authenticating, depending on nothing for its validity except immediate conviction of the Holy Spirit," this author assured them that no vision was invalid as long as it honestly grew out of their personal search for God, after which they opened up in a number of ways. They expressed visions that were new and distinctively their own, evidencing the "imaginative awareness" that marked Wesley's concept of experience,<sup>23</sup> while not seeing a necessity to force them on others. The use of the image by one young woman of psychologist for the Deity seemed to be as much of an authentic experiential revelation for her, as did the use by Amos of the image of God as divine construction engineer. They came to the point in their sharing where they were feeding the imaginations of one another and freeing themselves to grow in their faith. Their sources of revelation, be they biblical, spiritual, or

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<sup>23</sup> Rupert E. Davies, Methodism (London: Epworth, 1976), 84.

some other, had been discovered to be functioning in their everyday experiences and manifesting themselves in new and exciting ways. Now they were ready for the next step, when "experience unites insight with action,"<sup>24</sup> as they prepared to bring their images to the church family.

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<sup>24</sup> Tillich, 1:92.

## CHAPTER 4

## Sharing the Images

Collective as well as individual experiences are the medium through which the message is received, colored, and interpreted. The norm grows within the medium of experience. But it is at the same time the criterion of any experience. The norm judges the medium in which it grows; it judges the weak, interpreted, distorted character of all religious experience, although it is only through this feeble medium that a norm can come into existence at all.<sup>1</sup>

Biblical and experiential images for the Deity are alive and functioning for many Christians. But the problem arose of how to facilitate a sharing and honoring of those diverse images thereby freeing others to experience and share their images in a worshipful manner, how to, as Paul Tillich put it, unite insight with action.<sup>2</sup> The question raised by the World Council of Churches study was still with us. "How can we be creative and spontaneous, yet sensitive to those words from the past that speak authentically?"<sup>3</sup>

The setting for this sharing and experiencing of images was to be that suburban United Methodist Church where the probing of experiential images had taken place. Because of the conservative nature of a majority of the congregation it was deemed best to try only a little seeding of images,

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1 Tillich, 1:52.

2 Tillich, 1:92.

3 Crawford and Kinnamon, eds., 85.

biblical and experiential, rather than a complete reforestation. And the best agents for this seeding appeared to be the youth group as the congregation was very open to unconventional worship experiences on Youth Sunday, which occurred whenever there was a fifth Sunday in a month.

The standard Sunday morning format of worship was used so as not to alienate certain older members while still making it a vehicle for reimagining the Deity. But into this standard format the youth infused a rainbow of diverse imagery for God.

The first element in the service that the youth had to deal with was the Call to Worship. They wanted to emphasize that everyone has something to offer to the worship experience, no matter what their age, and that it is God that is the focus of that worship, not the pleasing or placating of each other. Following is the call to worship as they composed it:

Leader: Come to God!  
 People: OKAY, WE'LL COME!  
 Leader: Mothers, Fathers, Children, All - -  
 People: EVERYONE NEEDS TO COME  
 Leader: To worship God,  
 People: ON THIS DAY AND EVERY DAY - -  
 Leader: Giving thanks to God,  
 People: OFFERING ALL WE HAVE,  
 Leader: Doing our best to please our Lord.  
 People: AMEN.

This was written at the first work session on the worship service. At the second session several of the group had second thoughts about the first response of the people, "Okay, we'll come!" feeling it should be more formal

considering the background of the congregation. But those who felt worship should be less formal and more a part of everyday life won out and the wording remained unchanged.

The composition of a "Youthful Affirmation of Faith" was next on their agenda. They opted for following the basic outline of the Apostles Creed and including faith statements about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Church. Here, they felt, would be a good place to incorporate a number of biblical images for the Deity, even some that they did not particularly like, in order to get the congregation thinking in images and hopefully being more receptive to the more experiential images they wanted to share later in the service. They came up with the images, popcorn-style, putting them under the appropriate aspect of the trinity, then putting them in what they hoped would be an acceptable grammatical construction. The text is as follows:

I believe in God who created everything and is like a father and mother to us; who is the ruler and king of the universe, the Lion of Judah; who stands firm as a great Rock that cannot be moved; but at the same time is as loving and protecting as a mother eagle who spreads her wings over her nestlings.

I believe in Jesus Christ, our savior who died for our sins, and is the cornerstone of our faith. While he is the Sacrificial Lamb, he is also the shepherd who watches over all the people, and the elder brother and friend who listens and cares.

I believe in the Holy Spirit who was sent by God to be our guardian, counselor, and advisor, the lover who woos and wins us, and our conscience. The Holy Spirit is like an ever burning fire in our

hearts, a refreshing wind that keeps us going, and the guiding light that never fades.

And I believe that the Church is the people, not a building or institution; it is the family of God whose job is to help others and to spread the Word of God. Amen.

For the Hymn of Praise that normally follows the Affirmation in this congregation the young people selected "Praise Him, Praise Him", which includes such images as redeemer, shepherd, rock, the crucified, love, savior, prophet, priest, and king.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that this church has two hymnals in its pews, old frayed copies of The Methodist Hymnal<sup>5</sup> and fairly new copies of the New Church Hymnal which contains a number of modern evangelical pieces.

The invocation was a place where the youth felt they could lift up the idea that individuals can have favorite images that may speak to them better than others. In order to convey this they each took a name for God and said it at the beginning of the Invocation, which was then completed by a leader of the group. The names included were personal and formal, English and Tagalog, biblical and experiential. The resulting prayer was a special calling for God's interactive presence in the midst of the congregation.

O God, - dear Father, - and Mother, - Creator, - my Friend, - Counselor, - Sir, - Ama Namin, - O Lord, - Our

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4 "Praise Him! Praise Him!" written by Fanny J. Crosby, as found in The New Church Hymnal, Jacque Anderson, et al., eds. (New York: Lexicon Music, 1976), 281.

5 The Methodist Hymnal, Edwin E. Voight, et al., eds. (Nashville: Methodist Publ. House, 1966).



Heavenly Father - - please join us in our service, as we worship and magnify your name. Open our hearts in Christian love so that we may feel your presence among us and learn to share that wonderful feeling with others. Amen.

The scripture lessons selected for the service came out of the group's study of biblical images for the Deity and were part of their effort to show the congregation that the people of bible times used a variety of images in an attempt to understand that greater reality that we call God.

The Old Testament reading selected was Exodus 3;1-6, the account of Moses and the burning bush. Their reasoning in the selection was not so much for the imagery of the bush but for the idea that our God is also the God of our parents, and of many faithful people over the years. Secondary was the idea that God can appear in any way that God wishes and that this will vary with the individual.

In this church's order of worship the epistle reading comes next and the one that the young people selected was where Paul was commenting on the food offered to idols in 1 Cor. 8:2-6. In this pericope the idea is lifted up that, while in the knowledge of humanity there are many to whom the names god and lord are applied, for us as Christians there is only one God and only one Lord. The group felt this selection was important for it affirmed that, even if we as Christians call God by different names, and use different images to relate to the Deity, there is still only one God.

The Gospel lesson for the service was the miracle of

the fish and the calling of the disciples as told in Luke 5:1-11. Here the images that were felt to be important were Jesus as the "Word," as the "Teacher," and as the "Master Fisherman." They felt it was important that where Jesus as "Teacher" might reach some with the good news, for others it takes acts of the 'Master Fisherman' before they will listen and respond.

In place of the sermon the entire youth group put on a skit based on the preceding Gospel lesson. In it they stressed the point that we need to be sensitive to revelations of God in a number of different ways and that where, for some a miraculous draught of fish may be a symbol of God's presence, for another it may only be an unusable overabundance that ends up as a stinking mess. We must be careful not to judge from our perspective what may be a meaningful image of the Deity to another. Their hope was that through the skit people would become a little more tolerant of other person's imagery for the Divine, even though many would not welcome it regularly in the worship setting. They seemed rather realistic about what they could, and couldn't, expect from this particular congregation.

Because of a number of Filipino families in the congregation it was decided to recite the Lord's Prayer in both English and Tagalog, again lifting up the idea of using different ways to call upon the Deity (the difference this

time due to a difference in language).

The hymn of dedication was the Charles Wesley classic, "Ye Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim."<sup>6</sup> It was picked because of imagery like Master and King, Son and Lamb, and ever present friend and faithful lover. While the way the young people interpreted the images in the hymn may not have been the same way the older members of the congregation would see them, their multiple character was hopefully visible to all.

Following the benediction one verse of a designated hymn was sung as a benedictory piece while the worship leaders and choir recess. For this selection the youth picked the first verse of "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us" in order to layer on a couple of more images.<sup>7</sup>

The service as a whole was a pleasing mixture of Bible, tradition, and contemporary interpretation that the congregation, as a whole, was able to thoughtfully and prayerfully participate in, take to themselves, and consider for future reference. From the positive comments of many church members it seemed the worship service achieved that goal outlined in the World Council of Churches work of being "creative and spontaneous, yet sensitive to those words from the past that speak authentically."<sup>8</sup> The wide variety of

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<sup>6</sup> New Church Hymnal, 24.

<sup>7</sup> New Church Hymnal, 338.

<sup>8</sup> Crawford and Kinnamon, eds., 85.

biblical images for the Deity used in the service interfaced in such a way as to allow the people to participate in a meaningful and enlightening worship experience.

While the youth group felt they had gotten the congregation to think more about the Deity in a variety of biblically based images, when it came to sharing their own images for God in the actual service they became more hesitant. It must be realized that personal images for God are just that, very personal, and for youth to share that personal, and vulnerable, side of themselves is very difficult. The primary vehicle for the sharing was originally to be the skit about the rotten fish, but when it came to the actual service they felt more comfortable falling back on traditional images, the main exceptions in the skit were the referring to God as "Truth" and "Joy." We often speak of God as "Love" but how often is the Deity imaged as "Joy Incarnate." They also used the terms "the Promised One" (a traditional title) and "the Big Man" (a modern one) when referring specifically to Jesus.

In spite of their reservations the worship service was for youth and congregation alike an exciting time that opened all who participated in it to new images of and relational possibilities with the Deity.<sup>9</sup> Hopefully the vitality that was experienced in this worship service will

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<sup>9</sup> Haddon, Genia Pauli, Body Metaphors (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 61.

have a long-lasting effect on those that participated and on the faith community. As Ann Ulanov noted, when we have opportunities to actively experience our images for God, "whether in rich meetings with others or in the poverty of our own prayers, we will find live symbols again - new pictures that call to live again the old ones,"<sup>10</sup> and thereby enrich our spiritual life, individually and corporately.

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<sup>10</sup> Ulanov, 183.

## CHAPTER 5

## Evaluation and Interpretation

For little Bobby Johnson the fear he felt welled up in his throat like a great weight, taking away his breath. He had experienced dark nights before, so dark that no stars shone. But tonight seemed darker and more oppressive. It was as though the low hanging clouds were resting not only on the apple tree in the yard but on Bobby's own shoulders. When the wind driven rain began to pound against the little boy's bedroom window he hastily sought out his parent's bed, burying himself in the covers between their warm bodies. Even there the darkness of the storm seemed to reach him and sleep came only in fitful spurts. When morning came his childish fears fought to keep him in bed, lest the darkness still be outside. Patiently, lovingly, his mother led him to the window. All that remained of the storm were a few, high flung, wispy white clouds. But the sight that filled his being, raising the hair on the back of his neck, and almost taking his breath away, was the great rainbow that arched its way across the sky. His mother attempted to interrupt his ecstasy with a recitation of the various colors that made up the bow. But for Bobby the totality of the experience, the release of his fear and the presence of the great bow, was more than any single element his mother might lift up in her attempt to distract him from the terror

of the night.

Even as the rainbow contains a rich and varied spectrum of color, wider than the human eye can perceive, so also does the Bible contain a full spectrum of images for God, a spectrum of which we must take full advantage.<sup>1</sup>

When a child begins to walk, it is with one or two hesitant steps, and as we look at the rainbow, one or two particular colors may seem to stand out. But the child goes on to walk with unending steps and we learn to see the totality of the heavenly bow. So it is with images for the Deity in the sacred corpus. There may be one or two particular images that seem to speak to us in a particular way, but we must not limit our picture of God to them for this is a practice that limits our perception of the Divine, limits our ability to relate to the Deity, and borders on idolatry.

When we discover a particular image for the Divine that resonates with our own spirit, it is a wonderful, growth stimulating experience. But when we become so obsessed with the importance of this one image, and forget that it is just that, an image or signpost pointing to a greater reality, we are treading on dangerous ground. As Virginia Mollenkott noted,

It is all too easy to divert ourselves away from worshiping God to worshiping one particular image of God; and that is idolatry. The best way to heal

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<sup>1</sup> Mollenkott, 115.

ourselves of the idolatry we have fallen into is to utilize the full range of biblical imagery for God.<sup>2</sup>

It is the absolutizing of certain masculine images for the Deity that many in the feminist movement object to. But in elevating feminist images they often fall into similar traps of idolatry.

In his classic semantic study, Science and Sanity, Alfred Korzybski made his famous observation that "a map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness."<sup>3</sup> He went on, by parallel logic, to point out that when we consider language we find that words function only as maps. Words are not the object (or subject) they represent. In approaching biblical images for the Deity we can draw Korzybski's analogy one step further. All of the biblical images, taken together, make up a map that, if correct, gives us some idea of the nature of our God. However each individual image is only a piece of the map, a piece that if taken without the balance of the whole will give a distorted picture of the Deity.

We need to learn to look at the Bible as a whole, not limiting ourselves to a few favorite, familiar passages and the images they evoke. We will grow in God only as we open

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2 Mollenkott, 116.

3 Alfred Korzybski, Science and Sanity (Lakeville, Conn.: International Non-Aristotelian Library Publ. Co., 1950), 58.



ourselves to the totality of the divine revelation as recorded in the scriptures.

For a number of the students who responded to the questionnaire the Father God image was rejected because, in addition to raising negative personal visions of father for several of them, it had been lifted up as the only way to perceive God, or the best way, and people of this generation tend to reject absolutes. But in substituting other images for father they were losing an important way that the Deity relates to us, for the relationship between a caring and concerned, but firm father and his children is a very special one.

Another problem that arises out of using a limited number of biblical images for God is that their constant repetition drains them of the impact and power in our lives and tends to trivialize them. This results in our being "surrounded today by the remains of dead symbolism."<sup>4</sup> The cross is a good example of this trivialization as we observe it popping up everywhere, in single earrings and on rock music record covers.

For the youth in the local church the image of God as King had been drilled into them through hymns, bible stories, Christmas pageants, and Easter services. But this image achieved little, if any, resonance with their spirits and provided no way of relating to the character of the

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<sup>4</sup> Dillistone, 218.

Divine.

According to F. W. Dillistone, an additional reason for the loss of meaning and power in biblical symbols is our tendency to literalize them. "Literalism, rigid one to one correspondence between symbol and reality, removes all the overtones and intimations and imaginative suggestions which a true symbol always possesses.... If a symbol is to retain its vitality it must be constantly re-adapted and reinterpreted within fresh contexts."<sup>5</sup> While nature images like rock and light do not lend themselves to literalization, but remain symbols, anthropomorphic images such as Father-God and Christ as Judge become set in concrete and tend to become oppressive in their literal condition.

These cement images are more our recreating of the biblical images than being true to the original description. And it is with these recreated images that we try to coerce and manipulate others, for our own gains. Several respondents to the questionnaire told of just such uses of literalized images against them on their faith journeys. Only when they came to see the true spectrum of God's revelation could they overcome the harm done by this misuse of symbols.

We have seen that biblical images such as wings and water and shepherd do not have the same meaning today as

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<sup>5</sup> Dillistone, 219.

they did when they were first used as signposts to the character of the Deity, but they can still function in a helpful and inspirational way if we free them from the concrete we have set them in and let them grow and expand and interact with our modern life setting. When the biblical images are interfaced with our everyday life encounters, positive things happen. As was found in the World Council of Churches study "scriptural witness comes alive as it is in constant dialogue with contemporary experience."<sup>6</sup> For the members of the youth group in the local church the biblical image of light resonated with their own experience of light as revelatory of the Divine.

No matter how useful traditional images may have been to our forbearers it is only through images that are personally relevant to us and arise out of our own experience that we can enter into a meaningful relationship with our God.<sup>7</sup> We need to take personal inventory of our life experiences, to retell our stories,<sup>8</sup> to "find our pictures, uncover them, collect them, bring them, dump them all before God."<sup>9</sup> But as we saw in our study this may be easier said than done.

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6 Crawford and Kinnamon, eds., 103.

7 Ulanov, 181.

8 Estella Lauter, Women as Mythmakers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 214.

9 Ulanov, 184.

We need to create safe, intimate settings where people are open to share their inner visions without fear of ridicule or rejection, where they can have their images validated if not accepted by others. A part of this should be dialogue with the scriptures<sup>10</sup> including a realization that those biblical images arose from the experiences of individuals just like themselves.

There are two factors that work against our trusting and accepting our own images for God, images that arise out of that self-authenticating experience that Wesley spoke of,<sup>11</sup> images that confirm the scriptural images. Throughout the history of the Christian church we have tended to trust the revelation of spiritual matters to experts, priests and ministers, who are particularly gifted and educated in such concerns. Add to this the fact that the last half of the twentieth century has seen a great expanse of human knowledge and the need for experts to deal with any of a number of subjects, it is easy to see how the lay person would be hesitant to attempt to image the Deity.

Paul Tillich, in the third volume of his Systematic Theology, asserted that experiences of God, revelations, are ongoing but can change, as can their symbolic manifestation, depending on the individual receptor and interpreter.

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<sup>10</sup> Crawford and Kinnamon, eds., 103.

<sup>11</sup> Chiles, 85.

The revelatory and saving manifestation of the Spiritual Presence is always what it is.... But the content of such manifestations and their symbolic expressions, like styles in the arts and visions in philosophy, are dependent on the potentialities implied in the human encounter with the holy, on the one hand, and on the receptivity of the human group for one or another of these potentialities, on the other. The human receptivity is conditioned by the totality of external and internal factors ....<sup>12</sup>

If we can make this step of faith and realize that the revelation goes on, and then come to trust the fact that we can be receptors for that revelation and that it will be shaped by our experiences and expressed in ways and images meaningful to us, we will have come a long way toward trusting and accepting our own images for God. Then the next step is feeling secure enough in our own images to share them with others, in appropriate and receptive places and times.

Our modern age has seen a new openness and willingness for in-depth sharing. Small groups where sharing is valued are found within and without the church setting. It is only a small step from sharing feelings and experiences to sharing experiential images. As Robert Masson pointed out, "Symbols, though they are 'projections' and 'constructs' mediate the content of feeling, and . . . authentic human action is possible only on the condition that the whole is

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<sup>12</sup> Tillich, 3:337.

felt and responded to."<sup>13</sup>

Present in all the groups involved in this study was a desire to know and be known by God, to relate personally with the Deity. A common method for achieving this relationship was to look to the Bible for methods, ways, formulas that could be applied for them today. What they found were images, some of which helped while others hindered their quest. These images are what Robert Masson referred to as "terms" when he said, "They are terms which mean a presence, present in fact but unknown in full, present as desired but absent because unpossessed."<sup>14</sup> The participants in the study tended to experience a certain amount of frustration at this point as the images they found were tied to specific contexts and the separation from these settings was difficult, if not impossible.<sup>15</sup>

It is proclaimed within the faith community that God is still active within human history, even as the Spirit moved through the history of Bible time. When they had accepted and internalized this statement, not limiting themselves to conceiving of God only in biblical images and thereby saying that "God had ceased to function,"<sup>16</sup> they could move on to

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<sup>13</sup> Robert Masson, The Pedagogy of God's Image (Chico, Ca.: Scholars Press, 1982), 76-77.

<sup>14</sup> Masson, 79-80.

<sup>15</sup> Aulen, 106.

<sup>16</sup> Aulen, 116.

acknowledge their own personal images for the Divine.

The images that arose at this point were almost entirely relational and said as much about the person with the image as it did about the Deity. What they related as experiences of God were also reports of God's experience of them,<sup>17</sup> and as they found God they found something of their true selves.<sup>18</sup>

Taking the biblical and experiential images that the adults and youth had encountered in their small group into the worship service would only seem like the natural next step if we define worship as Walter Harrelson did in his book, From Fertility Cult to Worship. "Worship is an ordered response to the appearance of the Holy in the life of individuals and groups."<sup>19</sup> Identifying their own images for God had provided an entry point into a direct relationship with the Deity. And some way had to be found to share that with others. That way was the worship experience.

The sharing of images in an orderly manner, while focusing on the Deity, created what Robert Masson described as a "process of self-transcendence."<sup>20</sup> The presentation of

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<sup>17</sup> Moltmann, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Ulanov, 181.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Harrelson, From Fertility Cult to Worship (London: SCM Press, 1986), 19.

<sup>20</sup> Masson, 82.

such a wide spectrum of images for the Deity, images that many could identify and claim as their own, helped many of those who were there that Sunday morning to move beyond the images to the presence that shatters our images and replaces them with a new sense of the Divine in our lives, a presence that helps us turn again to the world with renewed images and vision, images of ourselves and our God, images of ourselves and our brothers and sisters, and visions of a world where each person's image is valued as each person is valued by God.

Each and every person has an image of the Deity, sometimes close to the surface, sometimes buried deep in their deepest heart of hearts, or as Ann Ulanov put it "secret from each other and often even from ourselves."<sup>21</sup> When we face our images we face our God, who is like them and unlike them, and in that moment of encounter we grow in grace and in freedom, "for the God who creates us as image-makers is also the God who breaks all our images."<sup>22</sup> And then we will make a difference, for we have allowed God to make a difference in us.

One last image of the Divine is that which speaks to the need in all of us for a God who is that personal Deity that meets us where we are. It is the image shared by V. R. Mollenkott in The Divine Human:

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21 Ulanov, 166.

22 Ulanov, 180.



We can resolutely learn to speak of God in an all-inclusive way. I like Schubert M. Ogden's definition of God as "The Thou with the greatest conceivable degree of real relatedness to others-namely, relatedness to all others." For this reason, God is "the most truly absolute Thou any mind can conceive." This Thou, this Absolute Relatedness, may be referred to as He, She, or It because this Thou relates to everyone and everything. This Thou is violated and enraged when any being is excluded from relationship, subordinated and dehumanized by our lovelessness and our sinful urge toward domination. This Thou is a jealous God -not jealous in the sense of one prideful Potentate who insists on having all attention focused on Himself, but jealous instead that He/She/It be recognized everywhere in everyone and everything. Jealous also that we may not separate out some part of the creation and make it our god. Unfortunately, our almost exclusive focus on male God-imagery has resulted in an idolatry of the male. We must take immediate steps to exorcise that idolatry, learning once again to relate to the Thou who encompasses and energizes all being, all becoming.<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion let us look at these images, biblical and experiential, from the perspective of the Wesleyan quadrilateral. Let us see what these four authority sources of John Wesley's theology, scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, say about images for the Deity and the imaging process. In the words of Wesley:

Scriptures are the touch stone whereby Christians examine all, real of supposed, revelations.<sup>24</sup>

The primary ground for the theology of John Wesley was the Bible as he called himself "homo unis libri," the man of

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<sup>23</sup> Mollenkott, 113-114.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, 25.

one book. This does not mean he was a literalist or a fundamentalist as we know them today, for he made note of the fact that there are scriptures that counter each other in meaning and direction. Colin Williams in his scholarly study of Wesley's theology distilled this founder of Methodism's approach to biblical interpretation into six rules (Quotation marks indicate Wesley's own words).

1. The literal sense is emphasized, "unless it implies an absurdity," and "if it be not contrary to some other texts; but in that case the obscure is to be interpreted by those that speak more plainly."
2. It is important to interpret a text in its total context.
3. Scripture must be compared with Scripture, and therefore a thorough knowledge of the whole is necessary for an interpretation of a part, "seeing scripture interprets scripture; one part fixing the sense of another."
4. Wesley was always anxious that, where possible, Scripture should be confirmed by experience.
5. Reason is to be employed to understand what the Scriptures declare, and how this truth is to be declared to men [and women].
6. The resultant exposition should be "plain truth for plain people," free "from all nice and philosophical speculations; from all perplexed and intricate reasonings."<sup>25</sup>

In addition to this methodical approach to the biblical text Wesley "insisted on...the need for the Spirit to illumine the heart of the reader so that he [or she] may receive the truth of the scripture."<sup>26</sup>

The outline is clear. John Wesley wanted the scripture approached in a methodical way, but also with a heart open

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<sup>25</sup> Williams, 27-28.

<sup>26</sup> Williams, 26.

to the guiding of the Holy Spirit, and he wanted the reader to look at the totality of the sacred corpus, not isolating or lifting up one text without the balance of the whole.<sup>27</sup> If this approach can be transferred satisfactorily to the subject of biblical images for the Deity, it would appear that the Wesleyan approach would say we cannot isolate or overemphasize one image at the expense of the others, but we need to look at the totality so that the Holy Spirit would have more avenues of revelation on which to reach us. For if as Wesley said, "all scripture is given by inspiration of God," then all the images contained therein are God given and are for our edification, "faith, and practice."<sup>28</sup>

Wesley, from time to time, did seem to have favorite images for God that spoke in particular ways to him. In the last collection of his works, as sighted in Philip Watson's The Message of the Wesleys, he lifts up the image of light in a very poetic manner reminiscent of the work of the mythic bricoleur.

The moment the Spirit of the Almighty strikes the heart of him that was still then without God in the world, it breaks the hardness of his heart, and creates all things new. The Sun of Righteousness appears, and shines upon his soul, showing him the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. He is in a new world. All things around him are become new, such as it never before entered into his heart to conceive. He sees, so far as his newly opened eyes can bear the sight.

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<sup>27</sup> Williams, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, 23.

The opening heavens around him shine,  
With beams of sacred bliss.

He sees that he has "an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous"; and that he has "redemption in his blood, the remission of sins." He sees "a new way that has opened into the holiest by the blood of Jesus"; and his light "shineth more and more unto the perfect day."<sup>29</sup>

So here Wesley himself lifts up how a biblical image can impact and describe the spiritual experience of the individual.

While scripture was the primary authority on matters theological for John Wesley, it was not the only authority. The areas of tradition, reason, and experience were seen as "further sources of insight [but they] must be congruous with the revelation recorded in scripture."<sup>30</sup>

John Wesley saw himself in the main current of faith in God with his new methodical approach still being "the one old religion; as old as the reformation; as old as Christianity; as old as Moses; as old as Adam."<sup>31</sup> Not only did he see himself a part of the tradition, but he greatly valued what it had to say about true Christians and genuine Christianity. He avidly read the works of the early leaders of the church including Augustine and Irenaeus, the mystics

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<sup>29</sup> Philip S. Watson, The Message of the Wesleys (Grand Rapids: Asbury, 1984), 102-103.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, 26.

<sup>31</sup> Chiles, 84.

such as Thomas a Kempis,<sup>32</sup> as well as the ecumenical creeds and the homilies.<sup>33</sup> "Wesley stressed..the importance of reading the works of the Saints of the Church down through the centuries in order to share in the insights God gave them into his [God's] revelation."<sup>34</sup> He also hoped to find in this tradition precedents for the experiences of those involved in the religious revival of his own time.

In his in-depth perusal of the works of these "Saints of the Church" it is more than likely that Wesley was aware of the rich heritage of imagery they used. God as Mother was found in the writings of a number of the Apostolic Fathers, including Origen, Irenaeus, and Augustine,<sup>35</sup> and as illustrated in this quote from Clement of Alexandria.

And God himself is love; and out of love to us became feminine. In his ineffable essence he is Father; in his compassion to us he became Mother. The father by loving became feminine; and the great proof of this is he whom he begot of himself; and the fruit brought forth by love is love.<sup>36</sup>

Augustine, who was quoted often by Wesley, used the symbol of divine Mother extensively as for him it was "a well known and centrally orthodox metaphor...It permeates [his]

32 Williams, 173.

33 Chiles, 84.

34 Williams, 25.

35 Kenneth Leech, Experiencing God (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 355.

36 Leech, 356.

exegesis, typology, sermons, and liturgy."<sup>37</sup>

A later member of the religious stream that Wesley valued was Anselm of Canterbury who spoke, in his "Prayer to Saint Paul," of the maternal aspect of God and Christ with phrases like "so, you, Lord God, are the Great Mother," and went on to address "Christ, my Mother" who through his passion gave "birth to Christians: by dying he begot us."<sup>38</sup>

Wesley saw these witnesses from our traditions as sources of revelation, with their experiences of the Divine joining and complementing and illuminating the scriptural revelation. If we use his guidelines, taking the total picture of God in the scriptures and taking the images from the traditional writings that are in harmony with that rich biblical record, our own body of resources for getting in touch with the reality we call God will be vastly expanded.

The third authority in the Wesleyan theological quadrilateral is reason. This is a term that John Wesley used frequently as in this often quoted statement:

It is a fundamental principal with us [Methodists] that to renounce reason is to renounce religion, that reason and religion go hand in hand, and that all irrational religion is false religion.<sup>39</sup>

Yet the question is left, what did he mean by reason. Robert Chiles defines Wesley's concept of reason in the

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37 Leech, 356.

38 Leech, 361.

39 Williams, 30.

following manner:

Reason enables man to know much about the world and the Creator behind it....Reason is to be employed "as far as it will go," and no one is justified in remaining in ignorance or in shrinking opportunities to learn....Reason is good and helpful but "it is utterly incapable of giving either faith, or hope, or love; and consequently, of producing either real virtue, or substantial happiness."<sup>40</sup>

Reason, for Wesley, seems to entail a process, a logical, well thought out, inductive and deductive, common sense approach to a subject, in this case Divine revelation, be it from scripture, tradition, or experience. He felt that it was important "both for laying the foundation of true religion, under the guidance of the Spirit of God, and in raising the superstructure."<sup>41</sup> But always one had to take into account what it could not do. It, in and of itself, could not show God.<sup>42</sup> Wesley did not believe in the possibility of a natural religion developing from human ends alone. God alone can show God. God reaches out through scripture and tradition and experience, in narratives and images and feelings and historical happenings. We as individuals observe and participate in these revelations and this is when we put reason to work as the "logical faculty enabling us to order the evidence of revelation; and...with tradition it provides us with the necessary weapon for

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<sup>40</sup> Chiles, 83.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, 30.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, 31.

guarding against the dangers of unbridled interpretation of the scripture."<sup>43</sup>

It seems what we are getting from Wesley are a set of theological checks and balances that will help us evaluate and interpret possible sources of Divine revelation, be they in the form of images or of texts. It is up to us to use them wisely and well.

The final authority, and the one most discussed by experts in Wesleyan theology, is experience. This is also the area that bears most on our study. But what did Wesley mean when he used the word experience? Is it the same as we mean when we use the term? Rupert Davies seems to feel it meant a kind of "imaginative awareness," that it referred "to that consciousness of personal relationship or of truth which comes to the whole personality."<sup>44</sup> Robert Chiles noted that "for some [commentators] it is an impressive anticipation of Schleiermacher's religion based on feeling; for others it is an image of more recent empirical method."<sup>45</sup> Colin Williams dismisses any theoretical interpretations of the term. He feels that for Wesley experience was the reality of a relationship with God, a relationship that could be manifest in a number of ways.

There is an irreconcilable variability in the

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<sup>43</sup> Williams, 32.

<sup>44</sup> Davies, 83.

<sup>45</sup> Chiles, 80.



operation of the Holy Spirit on the souls of men [and women].... Many find Him rushing upon them like a torrent, while they experience the o'erwhelming power of saving grace. This has been the experience of many; perhaps of more in this late visitation than in any other age since the time of the Apostles. But in others he works in a different way:

He deigns His influence to infuse,  
Sweet refreshing, as the silent dews....  
Let Him take His own way: He is wiser than you.

John Wesley 46

Wesley felt that experience of the Deity was as variable as the people to whom it came and to try and limit your description of it was limiting your conception of God. But he also felt that these experiences, however varied, would, if authentic, be confirmed, first by "the immediate conviction of the Holy Spirit,"<sup>47</sup> and then by the scriptural witness. Again it is his system of checks and balances. Our experiences do not duplicate or replicate the witness and experiences that grow out of the scripture or the tradition, but they do confirm and affirm each other.

Experience, for Wesley was the medium through which the Spirit spoke, but he would probably also agree with Paul Tillich that "experience is the medium through which the sources [of theology: scripture and tradition] 'speak' to us, through which we receive them."<sup>48</sup> We experience God in heart warming encounters and spiritual earthquakes; we

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46 Williams, 35.

47 Chiles, 85.

48 Tillich, 1:40.

experience God in Spirit illuminated scriptures and narratives; we experience God in the faith journeys and journals of the Saints; and through reason we order and apply these experiences as they unite "insight with action."<sup>49</sup>

And what does Wesleyan theology say to our quest for valid and meaningful images of the Divine? Wesley valued highly the two sources this study has used for images, the sacred corpus and the individual experience, and felt they were places where one could encounter the saving reality we call God. But another reality of our era is the one lifted up by Ann Ulanov: "The images people have within themselves and the images available in tradition and scripture do not touch."<sup>50</sup> Wesley felt that through reason we could order and relate these sources of revelation, but twentieth century phenomena have eroded the points of contact and too great a gap has been built. Biblical images have lost their relevance and we do not trust our inner visions and personal experiences of the Divine.

In an attempt to recapture the message and impact of the biblical images a number of them were studied in all their scriptural manifestations, along with the remnant of the oral tradition that surrounds them and the history and anthropology of the culture from which they arose. And out

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<sup>49</sup> Tillich, 1:167.

<sup>50</sup> Ulanov, 167.

of this study the author, acting as a mythic bricoleur in the spirit of Claude Levi-Strauss, constructed a narrative form that would hopefully help restore, with illumination by the Holy Spirit (as Wesley would say), something of the impact the images originally contained for our forbearers of the faith.

Next the inner, experientially based images of a group of seminary students were probed, watching for how they related to the biblical images in positive and negative ways. Themes were identified, themes of relatedness, that relatedness which Wesley saw at the heart of true religious experience, relatedness between the Deity and the human and relatedness between humans.

Then finally the renewed biblical images, in all their richness and diversity, were brought into dialogue with the experientially based images of a suburban congregation, a dialogue that grew and bore fruit: a new excitement and appreciation of that great diversity of biblical images for God and a conscious awareness of the validity and worth of those images that grow out of personal encounters with the Divine.

A team striving for excellence may refer to the Deity as "The Champion, Jesus Christ," while a race car driver may use the image of "The Great Crew Chief." A teenage having trouble at school and with her parents speaks of "My Psychologist," while we may envision the Deity as a warming

and illuminating light or the loving arms of a caring parent. Our picture might be complete or fragmented, similar to an ancient traditional vision or an abstract fantasy from a time to come. What we must come to realize is that these are just signposts to the greater reality, that reality which is constantly reaching out to us, its children, reaching out to move us beyond the teaching aids that are our images to a point where we will no longer

see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part [for all of my images, biblical and experiential can not add up to the reality that is God]; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood.

1 Cor. 13: 12

## APPENDIX A

## Questionnaire: Imaging the Divine

The following are questions given to sixteen randomly selected second- and third-year students at the School of Theology at Claremont, fall of 1987, and their responses. (All spelling and abbreviations are part of the original responses).

I. WHEN YOU THINK OF THE 'DIVINE' IS THERE ANY ONE SPECIFIC IMAGE THAT COMES TO MIND? DESCRIBE IT.

1. I think of a white light - a halo of sorts.
2. Its embarrassing to admit, but I still get an old man w/a long white beard when I try to think consciously of the divine (which translates, for me, as 'deity'); therefore I try NOT to think of the diety in terms of an image.
3. An evolving process of love 'groaning' to be born, embodied in an infinite number of concrete relationships.
4. Light.
5. I think of several [listed under III - creator, spirit].
6. The SEA - especially the breaking and receding of the waves. Because of the rhythm and cycles connecting to me as a woman.
7. No, I don't think so.
8. An omnipotent, elusive persona with no static characteristics.
9. I'm not sure you consider it an "image" but the most consistant expression is that of inner spirit, electricity, yellow light within each person, thing. At times it is more like a yellow "fire ball" within. This spirit is not only within each person, thing, but is also connected to that spirit within others.

10. It used to be light from the sun, but now its moonlight.

11. A woman with long billowing hair and flowing robes. She's reaching out to me and sometimes she sits beside me with her arm across my shoulder.

12. A mother nursing her baby. She is a white woman, young, with a shawl around her shoulders, with brown hair. The baby has very little light hair. I have also seen her as a young black woman. This image is very recent for me and the first time I have ever had one (god has always been intellectual, conceptual real as a left brain connection). Part of the reason I've had no image is that Jews don't [note: subject was raised jewish, now christian]. The image of mother is because I need to make a healthy connection with my mother.

13. Light.

14. My God understands me; My image of this god is warm, deep, color-full, mostly red, holding.

15. See III [source of power, "collective unconscience," my grandmother - holding, comforting, affirming, knowing = wisdom]

16. When I think of the divine there are two images that come to mind. First there is the image of space and light. This is somewhat vague, nebulous, undefined imagery. A kind of very full expanse of emptiness, that is whole. When specifically imaging Jesus, I meet him by the side of a high mountain lake, early on a warm afternoon, with a slight breeze that keeps the heat down. He is dressed in plain clothes, usually a plaid shirt and jeans, and he carries a small backpack. When we meet like this I see Jesus as about 25, with moderately long, dark hair. We talk about whatever we need to, and I am always assured of continuing love and concern. Our parting may be abrupt or gradual, but they are never painful. I should tell you, from these conversations I have learned that He definitely has a fine sense of humor.

II. IS THERE ANY POPULAR IMAGE OF THE "DIVINE" THAT YOU REJECT?  
WHAT IS IT AND WHY?

1. If you mean "God," I'm trying to "get the man off my eyeball" as Celie say. The male, old man image does keep coming back.

2. (See "I" above - the old man with a beard!) I have to reject 'him' simply because 'he' is too 'other'. My father was a passive authority figure who sat behind his newspaper the whole time I was growing up; he cannot express his feelings well and is amazingly inarticulate when the conversation moves to any level deeper than work, politics or current events. When I picture God as male, I see my father. HMMMMM... I never really thought of this so LITERALLY before - but if my 76 year old Dad let his thick wavy white hair grow out, added a beard and did some work with Arnold Schwarzenager to broaden his rather narrow shoulders, he would look alot like that spark-endowing figure on the Sistine ceiling!! Seeing God and father images conflated means that God seems distant, controlling, demanding, and unable to meet me at the levels where I most NEED to meet the divine.

3. Spirit: because I perceive of the "Divine" as a restless wind evocative of change.

4. Old man with beard on throne. I think in terms of "Spirit."

5. No.

6. Old white man with beard - too narrow and oppressive (racially and sexually).

7. An old man with a stick ready to hit you.

8. "Man" - as all being, all knowing (white beard or no).

9. I basically reject a "Divine" that is person-like - either male or female. I simply don't know how to relate to this kind of imagery.

10. Yes, God the Father - because it isn't so!

11. Father - too oppressive, too demanding, can't deal with him any more.

12. Jesus as a young white handsome northern European man with brown hair and sometimes nail marks in his hands and feet. Jesus never looked like this and also my ideal is not male, white or handsome. I have sometimes thought of Jesus as a short stout jewish eastern European type man who easily can laugh and tell stories (my ethnic heritage). I also can easily see Jesus looking like a bedouin.

13. Father.

14. I reject the jealous god who needs me (us) to take care

of him but doesn't tell us that straight out and pretends that everything he demands is for our own good. I reject this god because I feel he is abusing me.

15. White male - forceful, arbitrary, angry authority figure. 16. Although there is no popular image of the divine that I reject outright there are many which have no personal attraction. Images of the divine as female, bleeding, in perpetual agony over our sins, and the like are not part of my vision. I do not reject them, for within my view of the divine is room for other points of view.

### III. IS THERE ANY ASPECT OF THE "DIVINE" THAT YOU ESPOUSE OR IDENTIFY WITH? WHAT AND WHY?

1. I go back and forth between imaging the divine or God/Goddess as a person and as a "medium" of sorts that is in and around everything.

2. I identify most of the "Divine" in terms of CHARACTER TRAITS (wh/are not gender specific, and bring no particular visual images to mind). God/ess, for example, is a good listener and knows how to ask the right questions at the right time. God/ess want me to be all that I can be, and encourages me through others and through the "still small voice" that I hear inside my head. S/he is external and transcendent, internal and immanent; s/he is also relational. I see aspects of the divine character expressed often, and in suprizing places. I cannot always find a word to discribe or name the particular aspect - - but it is always unmistakeable. It registers as "true" and as "divine," whether it be a face of a friend, an insight for a paper I'm writing, a tough, internal struggle that remains unresolved, or... I guess this means that I define "character" pretty broadly - but divine character IS pretty broad, by definition!

3. Water - cleansing force which symbolizes & contains the capacity for change exerted in ways that can be non-violent. (I'm not thinking of water in a storm but the eroding effects of water, or the nurturing effects of a gentle rain....)

4. A loving "being." Caring.

5. Creator, Spirit - because it leaves room for further imaging.

6. The cycle of life - Creator (male & female God - i.e. the Divine She and He)



7. God as spirit and eternal - also I very much believe in the TRIUNITY of God.

8. I think ALL of us are aspects of all knowing and creating.

9. The idea of God, or Divine, as a relational type of feeling - connection between beings - animant and inanimant. I'm not sure just 'why,' but it seems important that all things are connected.

10. The wise old crone - because I am now nearly 60 and it makes an authentic image for me.

11. Immanence - the divine with me is very important as I discover myself.

12. God's gentle, caressing, comforting love. This is because it is new to me and what I needed for a long time. It is beginning to sink in and heal some old wounded places.

13. Earth mother as creative.

14.

15. Source of power - a "collective unconscious." My grandmother - holding, comforting, affirming, knowing = wisdom.

16. I would have to refer you back to question 'I' and my little talk about my image of Jesus.

#### IV. IS THERE ANY ASPECT THAT YOU REJECT? WHAT AND WHY?

1. Something that is ALL powerful.

2. I reject (or keep trying to reject) the whole AUTHORITARIAN business. God/ess may be omnipotent but s/he is not too keen on fostering my (or anyone's) dependency; I must learn to exercise my OWN power if I am to realize the IMAGIO DEI that's in me, and I must exercise it as God/ess exercises it - for the uplifting and NOT the repression of others and self.

3. Absolutely reject concept of God as desireless - the Unmoved Mover image.

4. Judgemental. Harsh.

5. Only if it is explicitly exclusive.
6. God as Father - seems too oppressive - like "II"
7. It depends upon what is said about the divine that I would think is not consistent with a Christian and Biblical view of God.
8. 1-person or spirit that = knows all - creates all & is in control of all.
9. I reject those aspects that would form any type of hierarchy. I don't understand the ideas of love, care-human characteristics.
10. See "II" [God the Father]
11. Transcendence - too distant too overwhelming above, not part of
12. Power over us to dominate, hurt, invalidate us. Because it has been used to strip me of my worth and any connection to my power, lovable-ness, etc. which is connection with the divine which is good, loving and, for our condition in this life, healing.
13. punishing, cruel, other.
- 14.
15. see "II" [forceful, arbitrary, angry]
16. The only aspect of the divine that I reject is that of vengeance or anger. My God deals with all fairly (yes, there is judgement, in some sense of the word), but never gives up searching and pursuing individuals. Heavy emphasis on never, this theology moves with me toward the grave, unless circumstances should then prove otherwise.

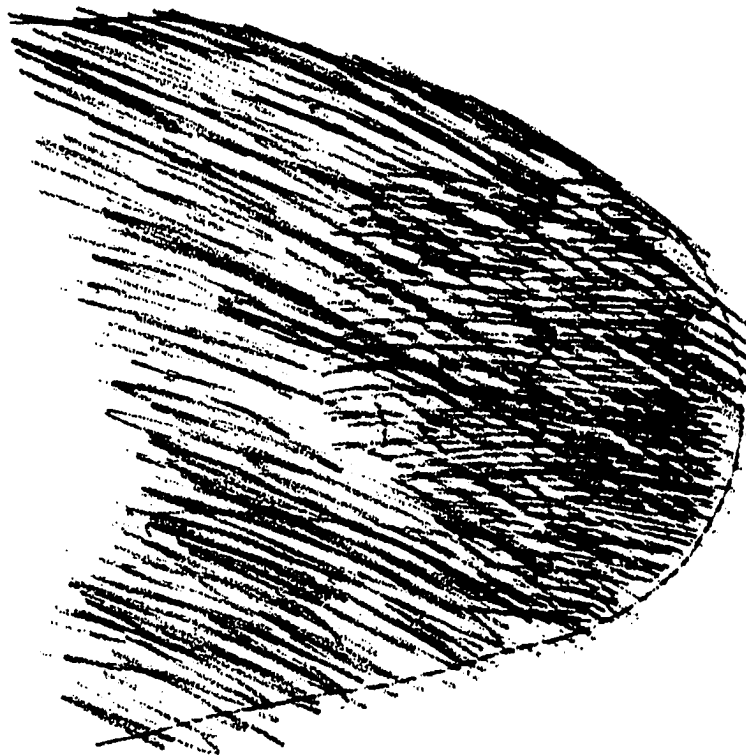
## APPENDIX B

## Feminist Renderings

In his book, The Children's God, David Heller observed that "in a study of religious imagery, projective drawings would seem a most advantageous tool."<sup>1</sup> In order to take advantage of this vehicle, an experiment in projective drawing was conducted in a class in feminist theology at the School of Theology at Claremont. The following are photostatic copies of the resultant drawings.

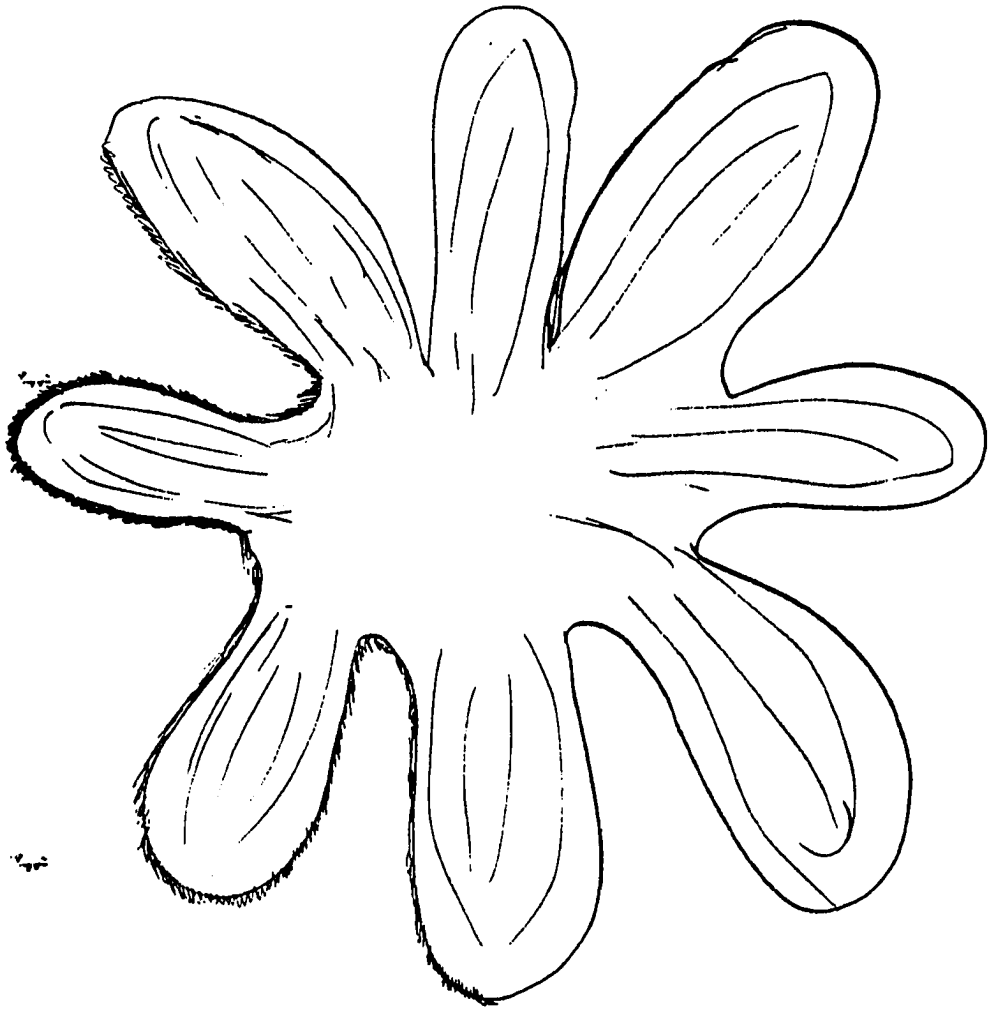
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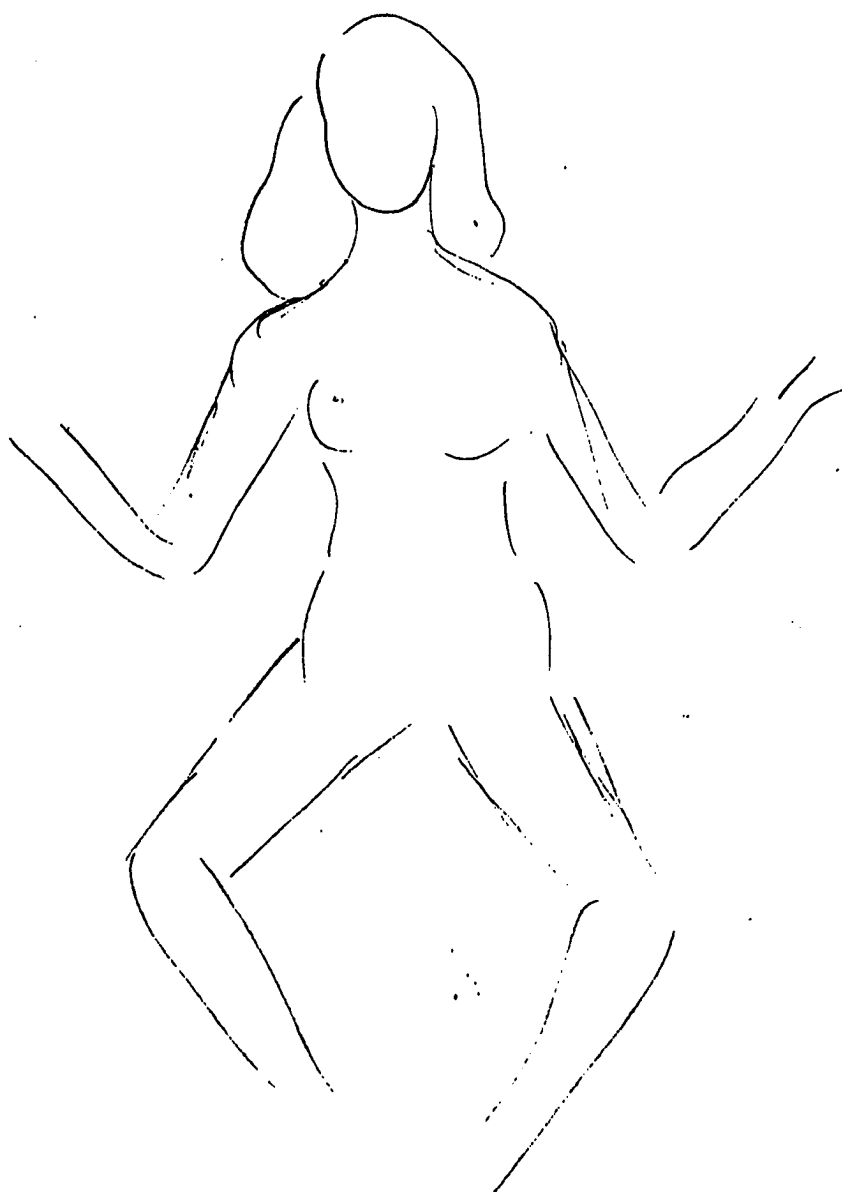
<sup>1</sup> David Heller, The Children's God (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 14.



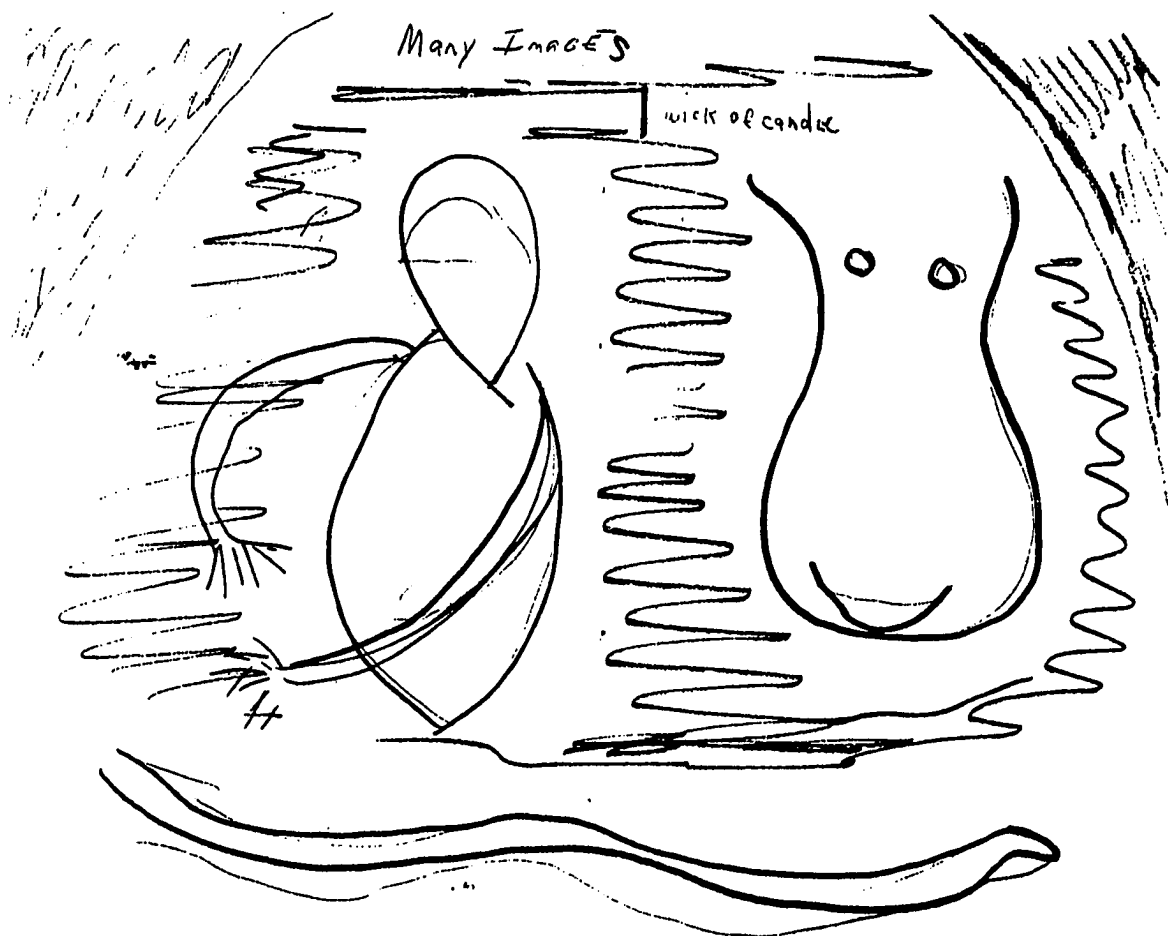
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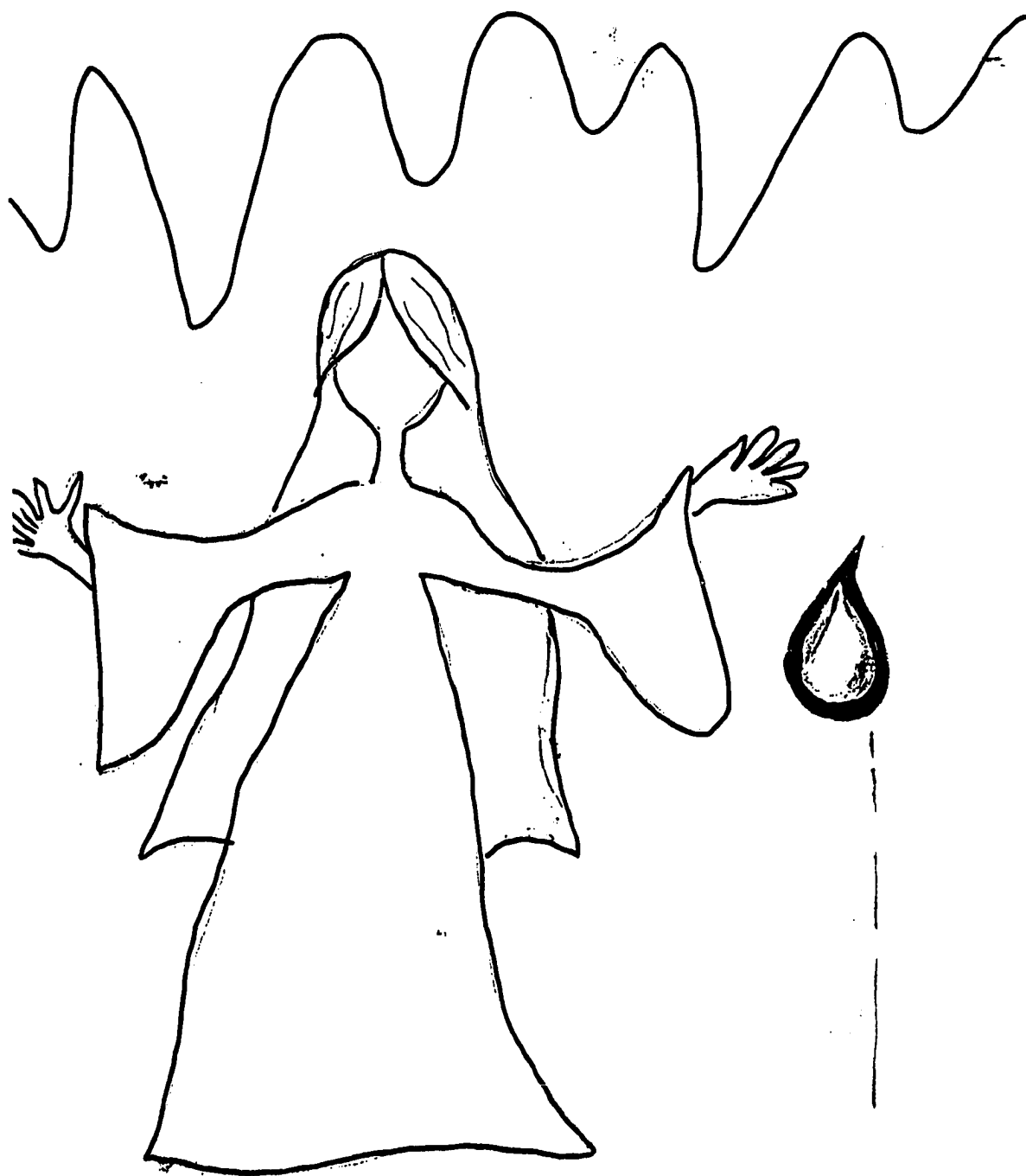
















Try and see what  
there is within.

Dec 14, 1987  
Feminist Ideology.

APPENDIX C  
Youth Worship Service

THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH OF LA VERNE

July 31, 1988

The Tenth Sunday After Pentecost

PRELUDE "Morning Prayer" Tschaikowsky

LIGHTING OF THE ALTAR CANDLES

MOMENTS OF FRIENDSHIP AND RECOGNITION OF VISITORS

PARISH NEWS

Explanation of the service

CALL TO WORSHIP

Leader: Come to God!

People: OKAY, WE'LL COME!

Leader: Mothers, Fathers, Children, All - -

People: EVERYONE NEEDS TO COME

Leader: To worship God.

People: ON THIS DAY AND EVERY DAY - -

Leader: Giving thanks to God,

People: OFFERING ALL WE HAVE,

Leader: Doing our best to please our Lord.

People: AMEN.

A YOUTHFUL AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (Unison)

I believe in God who created everything and is like a  
father and a mother to us; who is the ruler and king of the

universe, the Lion of Judah; who stands firm as a great Rock that cannot be moved; but at the same time is as loving and protective as a mother eagle who spreads her wings over her nestlings.

I believe in Jesus Christ, our savior who died for our sins, and is the cornerstone of our faith. While he is the Sacrificial Lamb, he is also the shepherd who watches over all the people, and the elder brother and friend who listens and cares.

I believe in the Holy Spirit who was sent by God to be our guardian, counselor, and advisor, the lover who woes and wins us, and our conscience. The Holy Spirit is like an everburning fire in our hearts, a refreshing wind that keeps us going, and the guiding light that never fades.

And I believe that the Church is the people, not a building or institution; it is the family of God whose job is to help others and to spread the Word of God. Amen.

HYMN OF PRAISE "Praise Him, Praise Him" No. 281\*\*

INVOCATION (each name for God spoken by a different youth)

Let us pray: Our God, - dear Father, - and Mother, - Creator, - My Friend, - Counselor, - Sir, - Ama Namin, - O Lord, - Our Heavenly Father - please join us in our service, as we worship and magnify your mane. Open our hearts in Christian love so that we may feel your presence among us and learn to share that wonderful feeling with others. Amen.

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\*\* All hymns are taken from the New Church Hymnal.

GLORIA PATRI

OLD TESTAMENT READING

Exodus 3:1-6

READING FROM THE PSALMS

Psalms 61:1-5

EPISTLE LESSON

I Corinthians 8:2-6

OFFERTORY

"We Give Thee But Thine Own"

No. 217

Doxology

Prayer: Please bless these gifts we offer in your name.

May they go to the work of your kingdom. Amen.

ANTHEM "God Doesn't Ask for a Mountain"

Chancel Choir, directed by John Johnson

GOSPEL LESSON

Luke 5:1-11

THE MESSAGE "Rotting Fish"

A skit based on the Gospel lesson

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISE REPORTS

SILENT MEDITATION, PASTORAL PRAYER

Dear Lord, - thanks for your everlasting guidance in our lives, for this beautiful day, and for answered prayers. Thanks for the helping hands of your people, inside the church and out. Open our eyes to the hungry, the homeless, and the victims of drought and abuse. Help us reach out with our hearts to the needy ones. And give our leaders a new vision of your peace for the world. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER (in English and Tagalog)

Our Father (Ama-namin) in heaven (sumasa langit ka) holy be your name (sambahin and ngalan mo). Your kingdom

come (mapasaamin ang kaharian mo), your will be done (sandin ang loob mo), on earth as it is in heaven (dito sa lupa para ng sa langit). Give us this day (bigyan mo kami ngayon) our daily bread (ng aming kakanin sa araw-araw), and forgive us our trespasses (at patawarin mo kami sa aming mga sala) as we forgive those who trespass ( gaya ng pagpapatawad namin) against us (sa mga nagkasala sa amin). Do not bring us to the test (at huwag mo kaming ipahintulot sa tukso), but deliver us from evil (at ihadya mo kami sa lahat ng masama). Amen (Amen).

#### HYMN OF DEDICATION

"Ye Servants of God, Your Master Proclaim" No. 26

#### BENEDICTION

May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; may the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Amen.

#### BENEDICTORY HYMN

"Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us" No. 338

(verse 1 only)

POSTLUDE "Prayer" Beethoven



## GLOSSARY

- feminism** Growing out of an increased awareness among women of their roles and potentials for growth in a society that has for too long been male, dominated this movement has come to stand for a commitment to human sexual equality and a deepening sense of mutuality. It is providing a critique on the forms and institutions of our society which have for too long been taken for granted. Insight from these critiques are utilized in this paper.
- experience** In its verbal form this word means to encounter, sense, feel, apprehend, or perceive. As a noun it is the act where these operations take place. As viewed from the point of Wesleyan theology its meaning expands. Rupert Davies saw it as an "imaginative awareness," and felt it referred "to that consciousness of personal relationship or of truth which comes to the whole personality." Other commentators on Wesley's interpretation of experience felt it was "an impressive anticipation of

Schleiermacher's religion based on feeling" while for others it spoke more of recent developments in empirical method. The Wesleyan scholar, Colin Williams, took experience back to a simple definition of relationship, and more particularly relationship with God.

image

In defining this term the Webster's International Dictionary points out that it can be something either concrete or abstract which refers to or represents something else. V. R. Mollenkott in his book, The Divine Human, goes further in stating that "authentic" images are products of the unconscious mind and therefore not tainted by culture. Marcia Falk echoes this belief but goes one step further in insisting that if images are going to be of use to us they must reflect our community's input as well as our complete self. For this paper images are seen as signposts pointing to the Divine and arising from two major sources, the faith community's text (the Bible), and the experiences of individuals.

monotheism

This term points to the reality of our faith, "Our God is One," this in spite of our

trinitarian imagery for the Divine. However, even as each human looks at the Divine in a different way, so a diverse number of images for the Divine are not just possible but very probable. The Bible is said to contain approximately 250 images that point to this one God, yet this does not lessen the oneness of the Deity.

#### worship

This is basically a relational experience between the worshiped and the worshiper. As in any relationship the knowledge that the parties have of each other is important if it is to be meaningful. We make certain assumptions about what God knows about us while our knowledge of the Divine is dependent on a number of things: our own experiences, the experiences of others, accounts of such experiences (as in the Bible), and aides such as ritual, liturgy, and images. For this paper worship is seen as an individual or group experience of relating with the Deity.

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